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SCIENCE FICTION

IT OPENS THE SKY

a novelet by

THEODORE STURGEON

NOVEMBER 1957

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JOHN GENTA '77

IT OPENS THE SKY

by THEODORE STURGEON

I walk under a closed sky, Deeming thought,

like a bug under a rock. . . .

When he was given a chance to get out, Deeming was ripe—

ripe to slam and beat his way into a far reach of space

where unlimited wealth waited on a Proscribed planet,

and a man was measured by his defiance of Angels in the past,

his immunity to death in the present,

and his hope of glory in the future.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKED AGAIN, this time right on the eyeball, making him blink.

Deeming had stopped at a crosswalk—he lived in one of the few parts of town where streets still crossed on the same level—and was waiting for the light to change, when on the post by his head, right at eye level, a hand appeared. It wore a thin gold band and a watch. It was the watch that made him blink. He'd

seen only one like it in his life before, a beautifully made little thing with slender carved-ruby numerals and, instead of hands, the ability to make its rubies glow one at a time for the hours, and a ruddy-amber pip of light float mysteriously at the right minute. It was geomagnetically powered and wouldn't wear out or run down for a thousand years. It came from some place in the Crab Nebulae, where the smallest

intelligent life-form yet known to man did a brisk trade in precision engineering.

Deeming tore his gaze away from the watch and followed the wrist and arm down to its owner. Deeming was not especially fond of animals, but he categorized his women with a zoological code. They were chicks, fillies, bunnies and dogs, in descending order of appeal.

This one was a goat.

She looked as if she had packed sixty years of living into thirty-five plus. She was half in the bag already, though it was still early in the evening, which accounted for her holding the pole up while she waited with him for the light to change. She had not noticed him, which was fine, and he acted just as abstracted as she was.

I'll give it two hours, he thought, and then, as she sagged slightly and caught her balance too quickly, like any drunk passing through dignity on the way to sloppiness, he made it 90 minutes. That watch is mine in ninety minutes. Bet?

The light changed and he strode out ahead of her. Just past the corner he stopped to look in a display window and see her reflection as she approached, stiff but listing a bit to port. He let her pass him and then to his delight saw her step into a cocktail bar. He went the other way,

rounded the corner, entered a restaurant and went straight back to the men's room. He had it to himself for the moment, and a moment was all he needed. Off came the stiff, clipped mustache; out came the golden-brown contact lenses, so that now his eyes were blue. He combed the part out of his flat black hair and set up waves. Half-inch inserts came out of his side pockets and were slipped into his heels, to change his gait and increase his already considerable height. He took off his jacket and turned it inside out, so that he was no longer drab and monochrome, as befitted Mr. Deeming, second assistant to the assistant desk man at the Rotoril Hotel, but sport-jacketed and cocky the way Jimmy the Flick ought to be. Jimmy the Flick always emerged and disappeared in men's rooms, not only because of their privacy, but because that was the one place you could count on not to see one of those damned Angels, who didn't eat, either.

Deeming was pleasantly certain, as he left the place, that no one had noticed him going in or Jimmy coming out. He went around the corner and into the cocktail joint.

Deeming sat on the edge of his bed feeling glum. He tossed the watch up in the air and caught it.

It hadn't been ninety minutes after all—it had taken him nearly

two and a half hours. He hadn't planned on her caring quite that much for the watch. She wouldn't take it off for him to admire and wouldn't agree that it was out of kilter and he could adjust it in just a second, so he had to use the old midnight-swim gimmick. He'd gotten her into the car all right without her seeing the number plate, and he'd done a clean job of parking by the river where it wouldn't be noticed. It was hard to judge how drunk she was. When she talked about her husband—the watch was all that she had of her husband's any more—she sobered up altogether too much, and it took a lot of oil and easy chatter to get her off the subject. But anyway he'd gotten the clothes off her and at last the watch, down there by the river, and then had managed to scoop up the lot and sprint back to the car before she could bleat "Oh, Jimmy—Jimmy, you can't!" more than twice. He didn't know how she'd get back to town and it didn't worry him. He found six and a half in her pouch, and an I.D. card. He pocketed the money—it about covered the price of her drinks—and incinerated the rest of her stuff with the clothes. A good clean job, carrying the special virtue of being totally unlike anything he had ever done before; if there was anything in the cosmos that would bring a swarm of Angels down on a citizen, it was

the habitual crime habitually performed. He should be proud.

He was, too, but he was also glum, and this irritated him. Both the glumness and the irritation were familiar feelings with him, and he could not for the life of him figure out why he always felt this way after a job. He had so much to be glad about. He was big and handsome and smart as an Angel; he might even say smarter—he'd been doing this for years now and they'd never come close to picking him up. Damn zombies. Some said they were robots. Some said supermen. People touched their cloaks for luck, or to help a sick child get better. They didn't eat. They didn't sleep. They carried no weapons. Just went around smiling and being helpful and reminding people to be kind to one another. There used to be police and soldiery, according to the books. Not any more. Not with the Angels popping up whenever they weren't wanted by the people concerned, with their sanctimony and their bullet-proof hides.

Sure, Deeming thought, I'm smarter than an Angel. What's an Angel anyway? Somebody with rules to abide by. (I've got a little more elbow room than that.) Somebody who is remarkable to begin with and makes himself more so with magic tricks and golden cloaks and all that jazz. (I'm an invisible clerk at a low-

level fleabag, or a disappearing cockerel with a line like lightning and sticky fingers—whichever I want.)

He tossed the watch and caught it and looked at it and felt glum. He always felt glum when he succeeded, and he always succeeded. He never tried anything where he wouldn't succeed.

Maybe that's the trouble, he thought, falling back on the bed and looking up at the ceiling. I got all this stuff and never use but a fraction of it.

Never thought of it like that before.

I break all the rules but I do it by playing safe. I play it safer than a civil servant buying trip insurance for a ride on a bus. I walk under a closed sky, he thought, like a bug under a rock. Of course, I put the tight lid on myself, which is better than having a lid put on, even a large lid, by society or religion. But even so . . . my sky is closed. What I need, I need *reach*, that's what I need.

Or maybe, he thought, sitting up to glower at the watch in his hand, maybe I need a payoff that's worth what brains and speed I put into it. How long have I been working respectably for peanuts and robbing carefully for—well, no more than an occasional walnut?

Which reminds me, I better get this thing fenced out before

that spaceman's relict finds herself a figleaf and somebody with a whistle to blow.

He got up, slowly shaking his head in disgust and wishing that one time—just one lousy time—he could make a touch and feel as good as he had a right to feel.

He put out a hand to the door and it knocked at him.

Now, you see? he told himself out of the same sort of disgust. You see? Anybody else would freeze now, turn pale, start to sweat, throw the watch into the reclamer, run up the wall like a rat in a box. But look at you, standing absolutely still, thinking three times as fast as a Class Eight computer, checking everything, including all the things you have already done to handle just this situation—the mustache back on, the brown eyes again, the shorter stature again, the heel pads hidden in the reversible jacket and the jacket hidden in the secret panel behind the closet.

"Who is it?"

. . . And your voice steady and your pulse firm—Deeming's voice and the pulse of innocence; not the jaunty Jimmy's tone or Jimmy's ratty heartbeat. So what's to feel glum about, boy? What's the matter with you, to dislike yourself and every situation you get into, purely because you know before you start that you'll handle it so well?

"May I see you for a moment?"

He didn't recognize the voice. That was good, or it was bad, depending. If good, why worry? And why worry if it was bad?

He dropped the watch into his side pocket and opened the door.

"I hope I'm not bothering you," said the pudgy man who stood there.

"Come in." Deeming left the door open and turned his back. "Sit down." He laughed the minor assistant's timid little laugh. "I hope you're selling something. I wouldn't be able to buy it but it's nice to have somebody to talk to for a change."

He heard the door close carefully. The pudgy man did not sit down and he did not laugh. Deeming did not care for the silence so he turned to look at the man, which was apparently what the man was waiting for.

"You can have somebody to talk to," the man said quietly. "You can talk to Richard E. Rockhard."

"Great," said Deeming. "Who might Richard E. Rockhard be?"

"You haven't . . . well, that isn't really surprising. When they're big, everybody knows them. When they're hiring and firing the big ones, they tend to be almost as quiet as assistant clerks, Mr. Deeming. . . . You know Antares Trading? And the Lunar and Outer Orbit Lines? And Galactic Mines?"

"You mean this Rockhard is—"

"In part, Mr. Deeming. In part. Among other things."

Jimmy the Flick would have bugged his eyes and made a low whistle. Deeming put his fingertips together and whispered, "Oh, my goodness."

"Well?" said the man, after waiting for something more and not getting it. "Will you come and see him?"

"You mean, Mr. Rockhard? You mean—me? You mean—now?"

"I mean all those things."

"Why does he . . . what—well, why *me*?" asked Deeming, with becoming modesty.

"He needs your help."

"Oh my goodness. I don't know what I could possibly do to help a man like . . . well, can you tell me what it's about?"

"No," said the man.

"No?"

"No, except that it's urgent, it's big, and it will be more worth your while than anything you have ever done in your life."

"Oh my goodness," said Deeming again. "What you'd better do is go find an Angel. They help people. I can't—"

"You can't do things an Angel couldn't do, Mr. Deeming?"

Deeming affected a laugh. It said a thousand words about the place and function of the Little Men of the world.

"Mr. Rockhard thinks you can, Mr. Deeming. Mr. Rockhard *knows* you can."

"He knows . . . about *me*?"

"Everything," said the pudgy man, absolutely without inflection.

Deeming had a vague swift wish that he had atomized the watch after all. It seemed to be as big and as spillable and as hot as a bowl of soup wedged into his side pocket.

"Better get an Angel," he suggested again.

The man glanced at the door and then took a step closer. He dropped his voice and said earnestly, "I assure you, Mr. Deeming, Mr. Rockhard will not and cannot do that in this matter."

"It sounds like something I'd better not do," said Deeming primly.

The man shrugged. "Very well. If you don't want it, you don't want it." He turned to the door.

Deeming couldn't, for once, help himself. He blurted out, "What happens if I refuse?"

The pudgy man did not quite turn back to face him. "You promise me you will forget this interchange," he said casually, "especially if asked by one of the gentlemen in the pretty cloaks."

"And that's all?"

For the first time a glint of amusement crossed the bland features. "Except for wondering, for all the days of your life, what you might have missed."

Deeming wet his lips. "Just tell me one thing. If I go see your Mr. Rockhard, and have a talk,

and still want to refuse . . . ?"

"Then of course you may. If you want to."

"Let's go," said Deeming. They were high over the city in a luxurious helicopter before it occurred to him that "If you want to," said the way the man had said it, might have many meanings. He turned to speak, but his escort's face, by its very placidity, said that this was a man whose job was done and who would not add one syllable to cap it.

Richard E. Rockhard had blue-white hair and ice-blue eyes and a way of speaking that struck like a series of sharp, skilled axe-blows, cutting deep, careless of the chips. This tool's edge was honed so fine it was a gentleness. Deeming could well believe that this man was Galactic Mines and all those other things. He could also believe that Rockhard needed help. He was etched with anxiety and the scarlet webs of capillaries in his eyeballs were bloated with sleeplessness. He was a man who was telling the truth because he had not time to lie.

"I need you, Deeming. I am supposing that you will help me and will speak my piece accordingly," he said as soon as they were alone in a fabulous study in an unbelievable penthouse. "I give you my word that you will be in no danger unless and until you do help me. If you do proceed with

it, you may be sure the danger is sizable." He nodded to himself and said again, "Sizable."

Deeming, the hotel clerk, got just this far with his clerkly posture: "Mr. Rockhard, I am absolutely mystified as to why you should turn to a man like me for any—" because Rockhard brought both hands down with a crash and leaned half across his desk and ripped all that to shreds.

"Mr. Deeming," he said in his gentle, edged voice, with all the power in the world throttled way back and idling at the ready, "I know all there is to know about you. I know it because I needed to find such a man as you and I have the resources to do it. You may wear that common-man pose if it makes you comfortable, but do not deceive yourself that it deceives me. You are not a common man or—to put it in the very simplest terms—you would not be in this room at this moment, because the common man will not be tempted by anything which he knows offends the Angels."

So Deeming dropped the invisibility, the diffidence, the courtesy and deference of an assistant to an associate, and said, "It is hardly safe for even an uncommon man to offend them."

"You mean me? I'm perfectly safe from you, Deeming. You wouldn't report me, even if you knew I couldn't strike back. You don't *like* Angels. You never met

another man before who didn't like them. Therefore you like me."

Deeming had to smile. He nodded. He thought, But when is he going to point out that if I don't help him he will blackmail me?

"I will not blackmail you," said the old man surprisingly. "I will pull you into this with rewards, not push you into it with penalties. You are a man whose greed peaks higher than his fear." But he smiled when he said it. Then without waiting for any response at all, he made his proposition.

He began to speak of his son. "When you have unlimited credit and an only son, you begin by being quite certain that you can extend yourself through him to the future; for he is your blood and bone, and he will of course want to follow in your footsteps. And if it occurs to you that he might veer from that course—and it never does occur to you until late in the game—then you let the situation get past all curing on the smug assumption that the pressures you can put on him will accomplish what your genes could not.

"Ultimately you realize that you have a choice . . . not the choice of keeping or losing him—you've lost that already—but the choice of throwing him out or letting him go. If you care more for yourself and what you've built than you do for your son, you throw him out, and good riddance.

I—" He stopped to wet his lips and glance quickly at Deeming's face and back to his folded hands—"I let him go."

He was still a moment and then suddenly wrenched his hands apart and then laid them down carefully and silently, side by side. "I don't regret it, because we are friends. We are good friends, and I helped him in every way I could, including not helping him when he wanted to make his own way, and giving him whatever he asked me for whether or not I thought it was valuable." He smiled suddenly, and whispered more to his sleeping hands than to Deeming, "For a son like that, if he wants to paint his belly blue, you buy the paint."

He looked at Deeming. "The blue paint is archeology, and I bought it for him. Dead diggings, pure knowledge, nothing that will make a dime to buy a bun with. That isn't my kind of work or my kind of thinking, but it's all Donald wants."

"There's glory," said Deeming.

"Not this trip. Now hear me out. That boy was willing to disappear, cease to exist, become nothing at all, if he could first follow a thread which almost certainly leads nowhere, but which, if it leads somewhere, can become only an erudite curiosity like the Rosetta Stone or the Dead Sea Scrolls or the frozen language in the piezo-crystals of Phygmo IV."

He spread his hands and immediately put them back to bed. "Blue paint. And I bought it."

"What do you mean 'cease to exist—become nothing'? You don't mean 'die'—you mean something else."

"Good, good, Deeming. Very perceptive. What it means is that in order to pursue this Grail of his, he must expose himself to the Angels. They couldn't stop him from going, but they can wait for him to come back. And I bought him another bucket of paint for that, to use when he's through. He has a paid-up ticket to Grebd."

Deeming unhesitatingly released the low whistle. Grebd was the name of a sun, a planet and a city in the Coal Sack matrix, where certain of the inhabitants had developed a method of pseudosurgery unthinkable far in advance of anything in the known cosmos. They could take virtually any living thing and change it as drastically as it wanted to be changed, even from carbon-base to boron-chain, or as subtly as it might want, like an alteration of all detectible brain-wave characteristics or retinal patterns, or a creation of a new nosc. They could graft (or grow?) most of a whole man from a tattered lump, providing it lived. Most important, they could make these alterations, however drastic, and at the same time (if requested) leave the conscious mind intact.

But the cost of a major overhaul of this nature was beyond reason—unless a man had a reason compelling enough. Deeming looked at the old man with unconcealed awe. Not only had he been able to pay such a price, he had been willing—willing in a cause in which he could have no sympathy. To care that much for a son . . . to care so very much that the most he could ever hope for now would be to meet a total stranger in an unexpected place who might take him aside and whisper "*Hello—Dad!*" but for whom he could do nothing further. For if the son had transgressed some ruling of the Angels so drastically as to need a trip to Grebd, the Angels would have an eye on the old man for all time to come, so that he would not dare even to smile at the new stranger. Could a father so much as clasp his son's hand if it meant sentencing him to death?

"In the name of all that's holy," Deeming breathed, "what did he want so badly?"

Rockhard snorted. "Some sort of a glyph. There's a theory that the Aldebaranian stock sprang from the same ethnic roots as those in the Masson planets. It sounds like nonsense to me, and even if it's true, it's still nonsense. But certain vague evidence pointed to a planet called Revelo. There may be artifacts there to prove the point."

"Never heard of it," said Deeming. "Revelo . . . n-no. And so—he makes his discovery. And goes to Grebd. And gets his total disguise. And forever after, he can't claim the discovery he made."

"Now you know about Donald," said the old man wryly. "He just wants the discovery made. He doesn't care who makes it."

They looked at each other in shared bafflement. At last Deeming nodded slightly to convey the thought that it didn't matter if he understood. If Donald Rockhard was crazy, that was beside the point. He said, "Now where do the Angels come into this?"

"Revelo," said the old man, "is—Proscribed."

Well then, Deeming thought instantly, that seems to be that, and where's the problem? A Proscribed planet was surrounded by a field of such a nature that if it were penetrated by a flickership, anything organic aboard would instantly and totally cease to live. If Donald had gone to Revelo, Donald was dead. If he had been snapped out of hyperspace on the way there by the outer-limit warning field, and had heeded the warning, then he hadn't landed on Revelo, hadn't broken an Angel dictate, and wasn't in trouble.

Deeming said so.

Slowly Rockhard shook his head. "He's on Revelo right now, and alive. Far as I know," he added.

"Not possible," said Deeming flatly. "You just don't penetrate the field around a Proscribed planet and live."

"Very well," said the old man, "nevertheless he's there. Look, I'll tell you something that only four other men know. There *is* a way to get through to a Proscribed planet.

"Thirty years ago one of my ships happened on a derelict. God alone knows where it came from. It was a mess, but it contained two lifeboats intact. Lifeboats with flicker drive."

"Boats? They must be big as ships, then."

"Not these. They do the same thing as our flicks, but they don't do it the same way, and we couldn't see just how. The captain of my freighter brought 'em back for me, for my spacecraft collection, never knowing just what he had. We found that out by accident. We fitted them out with Earth-type controls, but although we know what button to push, we don't know what happens when we push it. It worked no better than our own flicks, so there was no point in filing the information with the Improvement Section. And when we found out the ships would penetrate the Proscribed planets, we just kept our mouths shut. I have my opinion of the Angels, but I will say that when they Proscribe a planet, they do it for a good reason. It may have

rock-plague aboard, or, worse still, yingyang weed. Or it may be just that the planet is deadly to humans, because of its sun's radiation or the presence of some hormone poison."

"Yeah," agreed Deeming, "Nantha, Sirione, and that devil's world Keth." He shuddered. "Guess you're right—the Angels know what they're doing just this once. . . . What's so special here about Revelo, that it's Proscribed?"

"As usual, the Angels won't say. It might be anything. As I say, I trust them on that, and I'm not going to be the one who spreads around a device to make it possible for anyone to penetrate any of 'em."

"Except Donald."

"Except Donald," Rockhard conceded. "For that I have no excuse. If something there kills him, it's a chance he was willing to take. If he brings something out inadvertently, it will be taken care of on Grebd. And I know he won't bring out anything on purpose, like yingyang seeds. . . . Explain it all away, don't I?" His voice changed, as if some internal organist had shut down all the stops and grouped out new ones. "Don't tell me I shouldn't have done it. I know that. I knew it then. But I'd do it again, hear? I'd do it again if it was what he wanted."

There was silence for a time and Deeming turned his head

away as a decent person might, offering privacy to another. Rockhard said, "After Donald left, we found out how the little alien flickers penetrate the Proscribed planets. They turn it inside out. An analogy might be the way a surge of current will reverse the polarity on a DC generator. We found out," he said bleakly, "that if that happens, the flicker goes in harmlessly. And then when it comes out, the field will kill anyone aboard."

He raised his head and looked at Deeming blindly. "Don doesn't know that," he whispered.

Deeming said, "Oh."

After a while he spoke again, incredulously, "I think you're saying that I . . . that somebody has to go there and tell him."

"Tell him? What would he do if you told him?"

"Wouldn't the flicker reverse the polarity a second time?"

"Not from the inside. Besides, that polarity-reverse is only an analogy, Deeming. No; what has to be done is to take him this," and from the desk drawer he scooped two tiny cylindrical objects. Both together were less than the length of his little finger, smaller in diameter than a pen.

Deeming rose and went to the desk and took one of them up. There were four separate coils rigidly mounted on the cylinder, toroids, each wound with what seemed to be thousands of precise

turns of microscopically fine wire. At one end was an octagonal recess, meant apparently to receive a rotating shaft, as well as a spring collar designed to clamp the device down. The other end faded to insubstantiality, neither transparent nor opaque, but both and neither, and acutely unsettling to watch for more than a second or two.

"Replacement freak coils for the flicker-field," he diagnosed. "But I never saw them this tiny. Are they models?"

"The real thing," said Rockhard tiredly. "And actually an improvement on the one the aliens put on those boats. Apparently they never encountered the kind of death trap the Angels use, or they might well have designed one like this."

"What do they do?"

"Put a certain randomness in the frequency of the flicker-field, when it approaches a Proscribed area. Just as a flicker-field works by making a ship, in effect, exist and cease to exist in normal space, so that it doesn't exist at any measurable time as real mass, and can therefore exceed the velocity C, so this coil detects and analyzes the frequency of the Angel's death-field, and phases with it. Then the death-field doesn't kill anything because the approaching ship ceases to exist before it enters the field and does not exist again until it is through it. Unlike the one

Donald used, it doesn't affect the field or reverse its direction."

"So if Donald gets one of these and replaces his frequency coil with it—"

"He can forget the existence of the Angel's field."

"On Revelo or any other Proscribed planet." Deeming tossed the coil and caught it. He held it up and sighted past it at Rockhard. "I've got a whole cosmos full of bad trouble here," he said steadily.

"You have every rotten plague and dangerous plant pest known to xenology, right there in your hand," agreed Rockhard.

"And yingyang weed. Lots of money in yingyang weed," said Deeming reflectively. The name yingyang was derived from the old Chinese *yin and yang*, the two-colored disc divided by an S-shaped line, and representing all opposites—good and evil, light and dark, male and female, and so on. Surprisingly, the flowers were an almost perfect representation of the symbol in red and blue. It was by far the most vicious addictive drug ever known, because not only was it potent and virtually incurable, it increased the addict's intelligence five-fold and his physical strength two to three times, and he became an inhuman behemoth with the sole desire to destroy anything and everything between himself and his source of supply, able to outlast,

outthink, outfright and outrun any one of his species.

"If you're really thinking about making money out of yingyang, you're a swine," said Rockhard evenly, "and if that was meant as a joke, you're an oaf."

Deeming locked eyes with him for a moment, then dropped his eyes. "You're right," he muttered. He put the coil carefully down on the desk next to its mate.

Rockhard said, "You worry me, Deeming. If I thought you'd use these coils for any such thing I'd . . . well, Donald can die. He'd die gladly, if he knew."

Deeming said soberly, "Can you find a man willing to breach an Angel's command who is not also willing to consider anything that comes his way?"

"*Touché*," said Rockhard with a bitter and reluctant grin. "You have a head on your neck. Well, have you got the picture? You're to go to Revelo in the other alien lifeboat, equipped with this coil. Slip through the field, locate Donald, tell him what's happened and see that his coil is replaced with this one. Then off he goes to Grebd for his—his camouflage job."

"And what do I do?"

"Come back with a message from Don. He'll know which one. When I hear it I'll know if you've done the job."

"If I haven't I won't come back," said Deeming bluntly, and

realized as he said it that incredibly, he had at some point decided to do this crazy thing. "And what do you do if I come back and say 'Mission accomplished?'"

"I'm not going to name a figure. It's a little like the way top executives get paid, Deeming. After a certain point you stop talking salary, and a man begins drawing what he needs for expenses—any expenses—against the value of his holdings. When his holdings go up to a certain level, the company stops keeping books on what he draws. It'll be like that with you. You just take what you want, as often as you like, for as long as you live. One man *might* break up this organization by throwing assets away, but he'd have to work for a good long while to do it."

"We . . . ah . . . have no contract, Mr. Rockhard."

"That's right, Mr. Deeming."

He's saying, thought Deeming, *you can trust me*. And I can. But I can't say that to him. He'd have to answer no. He said, cruelly, "You ought to let him die."

"I know," said Rockhard.

"I'm a damn fool," said Deeming. "I'll do it."

Rockhard held out his hand and Deeming took it. It was a warm firm hand and when it let go, it withdrew slowly as if it regretted the loss of contact, instead (like some) of falling away in relief. This was a man who meant what he said.

Which of course, he thought, is only another species of damn fool, when you get down to it.

Why me?

That was the base thought, the kingpin thought, the keystone thought of everything that happened between that first meeting and the day he coined off for Revelo. By that time, he knew the answer.

Begin at Earth, go to Revelo, do a little job and return. If it had been just that, and that's all, there wouldn't have been a reason for Deeming's presence in the matter. The nameless pudgy man could have done it; the old man could have done it himself. But there were—details.

There were the two interminable briefing sessions. He had the new coil; all he had to do was plug it into the alien ship.

But the alien ship was hidden far from Earth.

All right; given the ship, all he needed was to drop a Revelo course-coin into his autopilot and push the button.

But he didn't have a Revelo course-coin. Nobody had a Revelo course-coin. Few people even knew where it was. There was a coin, certainly. In the files at Astro City on Ybo. He'd have to get that one. The files—

The files were in the Angel Headquarters building.

Well, if he got the ship, and

if he got the coin, and if Rockhard was right and the new coil worked properly, not only to get him through the death field but back out again, and if this could be done without alerting an Angel (Rockhard's reasoning was that by turning the field inside out, Don had almost certainly alerted them, but that the new design, which would not—he hoped—touch or affect the field, would permit Deeming to get in and both of them to get out again without activating any alarms. So that for an indeterminate time the Angels must operate on their original information—that one ship had gone in, none had come out), and if Donald Rockhard were alive, and if he knew what message to give Deeming and if Deeming got back all right and if Rockhard understood the message properly and if, after all this, Rockhard paid off, why then, this looked like a pretty good deal.

And also clearly something that only a man like Deeming could possibly accomplish.

So there were the two long briefings with Rockhard and his scientific assistant Pawling (of whose discourse Deeming caught not one word in three), and a hurried trip back to his own quarters where he wrote suitable letters to the hotel and to his housing and food depots and maintenance and communications services and so on and on, in-

cluding the mailing of the goat's wrist-watch where it would do him the most good, and the paying of bills for liquor and clothing and garage and, and, and . .

How doth the little busy bee keep from flipping his lid like me? he sang insanely to himself as he did all the things that would assure the hive that it could rest easy, nobody was doing anything unusual around here, honest.

When he was finished with it, his affairs were ready for him to resume in a couple of weeks, or if not a small secondary wave of assurances to the trades, comforts and services would go out announcing a minor accident, and making arrangements for another two weeks' absence, and then another ripple reporting a new job on Bluebutter, which was somewhere among the Crabs, and at last a line to a bartender, *How are you Joe?* to be mailed at the end of two years. If that one ever got mailed, he'd be eighteen months dead, and if he thought he had cold feet before, he was afraid to bend his toes when he wrote it.

The day came (was it really only four days since he started out to fence a watch and faced a knock on the door?) for departure. Rockhard shook his hand, and Deeming for the second time felt that warm contact and along with it, a thing in the

old cold eyes that could only be covered by the word "pleading." If the pleading had words, what would they be? *Bring my boy out.* Or, *Let me trust you.* Or maybe, *Don't doubt me: don't ever doubt me.* Perhaps, *You're my kind, boy—a pretty sleazy edition, but anyway my kind, so.....take care of yourself, whatever.*

He handed over more cash money than Deeming had had in his hand since the night he'd gathered up the big pot at the poker game, and he'd given that to the guy who won it from him on the next hand. But this time it was only expense money, not even figured in. Rockhard probably never knew how close he came to losing his man by the size of that pittance.

Or maybe he did—the pudgy man and the chauffeur were about as easy to shake from that moment until coin-off as a coat of shellac.

He left the house in the back of a utility truck which pulled up finally in utter darkness inside a building somewhere. He was hustled wordlessly into a side room, shoehorned into a power suit, and rammed tortuously into a space fully as airy as the underneath of a studio couch, and about two handsbreadths shorter than he was tall, so that he couldn't straighten out. They welded him in, at which point he discovered that his honey-pipe had not been giving the quarter-turn necessary to open

it to the converters. He spent almost the entire night trying to grip it with his southern cheek, which he found indifferently prehensile and, as time went on, demanding of different subtleties that he would have sworn were beyond his control. He was wrong; he succeeded by laborious fractions and got it open and at last lay sweat-drenched and limp with effort and relief.

And then more time flowed through his prison than any small space ought to hold, when he had nothing to do but think.

And the only thing he could think about, and that over and over, was that he really wasn't too uncomfortable or distressed by this imprisonment, because he seemed to be conditioned to it. He had, after all, for some years lived huddled in mediocrity, with his hotel job pulled no less tightly around him than this welded-steel pillbox. His excursions as the disappearing Jimmy the Flick were no less confined; confined by limited time, limited targets, and the ubiquitous golden Angels with their wise kind faces and understanding voices, God burn 'em all. They were supposed to be unkillable, but he'd sure like to get one for Christmas and make some simple tests lasting till, say, Midsummer Eve. They more than anyone had kept the sky closed over him, so he'd had to walk everywhere with his head bent.

He tried to imagine what it would be like to walk in a place where his personal sky had room for a whee of a jump and a holler that anyone could hear and the hell with them; but the wish was too far from his conditioning and bounced him right back to the uncomfortable thought that he was not uncomfortable here. And so around he went again on the synapse: closed box, closed sky, damned strong gentle Angels, how would it be to run tall some place, but I can't quite grasp that, here under this closed sky.

And then he slept, and then the surface under him rumbled and tipped, and lo and behold, it was only the next morning after all.

He switched on his penetroscope and waited impatiently while the pseudo-hard radiation soaked its way through the beryl hull-metal and the image cleared. His prison was being lifted by a crane onto a lowboy trailer, which began to move as soon as it had its load. It rumbled out to the apron where the ship waited, belly down like some great wingless insect, with its six jointed jacks, one of which was footless and supported by a tall gantry which had thrust out a boom to hold up the limb, like a groom holding up a horse's split hoof while the stable boy runs for the liniment.

The lowboy was positioned under the leg, and Deeming blinked

at the pounding and screeching going on above him as his tomb was bolted to the landing jack and became a part of it. Then there was a quiet time as tools and ground hands got clear, ports and locks were battened, and the crew assumed coin-off stations.

Somewhere a whistle was blowing; Deeming could hear it through his radio, picking it up from the intercom which in turn had it from an outside microphone in the hull. It stopped, and there was a rumbling purr as all six legs began to straighten, pushing the ship up off the ground so that most of the terrestrial matter included in its flicker-field would be air.

Then without warning the earth was gone, the vanished ship lightyears away already before the gut-bumping boom of its air-implosion could sound. Deeming's stomach lurched, and then there was gravity again and a scene in his 'scope—a rolling gray-green landscape, with a few cylindrical buildings and a half-dozen docking pads.

That's the trouble with space travel nowadays, he thought glumly. They've taken all the space out of it.

The ship hovered perhaps a thousand feet high, drawing anti-grav power from the beam generator down below. It drifted slowly, positioning itself over one of the empty pads.

Pad Four.

According to his briefing, the correct pad was number 6. With rising anxiety he saw that 6 was already occupied by a small sport flicker.

There was only one way he would ever get out of here, and that was in Pad 6. Nobody in the ship knew he was in this jack foot. He was not even sure of the origin or destination of the ship, or on which planet they were now landing. If it set down in the wrong pad, he would stay right where he was and starve, or set up a howl with his radio and get dragged out at the wrong place at the wrong time by the wrong people.

He turned on his transmitter, fingered it to docking frequency, and said authoritatively, "Wear off, skipper. Pad 6 is yours." He waited tensely. He hoped ground control would think it was hearing a crewman speaking to the captain, while the captain thought he was hearing ground control.

He heard murmurs in the intercom but could not pick them up clearly. The ship steadied, then began to sink again. He waited tensely, begging his brains to come up with something, anything, then literally sobbed with relief as a space-suited figure tumbled out of the blockhouse and sprinted for the sportster in Pad 6. The little ship lifted and slid into 4, and Deeming's ship settled into its assigned berth.

For a moment Deeming lay trembling with reaction, and then grinned. He wondered if the captain and the control officer, sitting over a beer later, would think to ask each other who had called out to wear off. That, he said, is how fights start in bars.

He scanned once around him with the 'scope and thereafter ignored the scene. He grasped the metal ring in the center of the floor of his prison and turned it. Faintly, he felt the slight tapping of a relay sequence, and then the surface on which he lay began to descend. Down it went to ground level, and still down. He snapped on his helmet light confidently; nothing would be seen from outside but the great round jack foot pressed solidly against the concrete pad. Who could know that its sole pressed a matched disc of concrete down into the ground?

The movement stopped and Deeming saw the niche in the concrete wall to his right. He swiftly rolled into it. The surface which had carried him down started back up. Silently it slid by him until it formed a roof for the underground room which now was revealed.

He dropped down to the floor. The space was tiny, just enough for the false foot of the jack to lower him here—and for the tiny alien lifeboat which lay welcoming him with glitters of gold from its polished, dust-bloomed surface.

It was a sphere, at first sight far

too small to be good for anything. The single bucket seat had been designed for a being considerably shorter than he, and narrower too, he realized, grunting as he wedged himself into it. The controls were few and simple. The hull material was, from inside, totally transparent. The entire power plant must be under the seat. The flicker-field of this ship would be small enough so he could coin off even from this space.

He thumbed the sensors at his waist, and settled back to wait. In a moment he heard the hiss of air as his power suit flooded the tiny cabin, and then the sensors, having analyzed the atmosphere and pressure-checked the seals, twinkled cheerfully.

With a sigh of relief he wrung his helmet off and unclamped his gauntlets. From his pouch he found the course-coin for Ybo, an osmium disk with irregular edges like a particularly complicated cam. He dropped it in the slot of the course box, and confidently thumbed the red button.

There was no sound. The boat seemed to settle a little, and there was a measurable flash of that indescribable, discomfiting greyness to be seen outside. Deeming was not worried about the sudden vacuum he had created in the hole. It would hardly be noticed amid the rumblings and scrapings of dockside, and the chances were that air would seep in slowly

enough to make the whole thing unnoticed.

He looked around him with pleasure. Rockhard's people had really set things up properly. Though a flickership could coin off from anywhere, on, over, or under the surface, planetfalls were generally made high. Contact with anything on the ground from a child's toy to an innocent bystander could be unpleasant. It wouldn't hurt the ship, which would flick out of existence and remove itself automatically at the slightest sign of coexistent matter, but the less resilient planetbound object would not be so fortunate. One solution was a landing plate, and that was what had been supplied here. It beamed the ship in and brought it to contact unless there was enough heavy matter in the way to be dangerous, in which case the beam operated but the landing guide did not, and the craft would appear with good safe altitude. The device was no larger than a dinner-plate, and, buried under a sprinkling of topsoil, it was undetectable.

The lifeboat nestled near the bottom of a deep narrow cut in hilly land. It was night. A brook burbled pleasantly somewhere close by. Weeds nodded and swayed all about; a searcher would have to fall over the ship before he could see it. Deeming unhesitatingly unbuttoned the canopy

and swung it back. He had been on Ybo before and knew it as one of the few "perfect" Terran planets. He breathed the soft rich air with real pleasure, then rose and shucked out of his power suit and stowed it on the seat. He pulled the creases out of his trustworthy reversible jacket, checked his pockets to see that he had everything he needed, closed and locked the canopy, and climbed the steep side of the gully.

He found himself at the edge of a meadow. A beautiful planet, he told himself cheerfully. He stretched, for a moment capturing that open-sky fantasy of his. Then he saw moving lights, and shrank down into the long grass, and his personal sky was tight down over him again.

It turned out to be only a ground car, which wouldn't be able to spot him there. He watched it veer closer to him and then pass not thirty paces away. Good; a road was just what he was looking for.

He took careful bearings of the bank on which he stood, and then followed the crest of it down to the road. He was gratified to see a milepost by the coping of a stone bridge which carried the road over the brook he had heard. Finding this place again would not be difficult.

He strode cheerfully along the road toward the loom of city lights that limned the wooded

hills close ahead. He was still in his *Why me?* phase, and he had a moment of real regret that Rockhard could not have shared this adventure with him, or even done it alone. Well . . . if he wanted to give away unlimited chunks of credit for work as pleasant as this, it was his hard luck.

He mounted the hill and suddenly the city was all around him. His landing spot wasn't at the edge of town—it was in Astro City's huge Median Park. Why, there was the Astro Center, not five minutes away!

It was an impressive building, one of those low, winged structures which seem to be so much larger on the inside than they are outside. Wide shallow steps led up to the multiple doors. It must have been early in their evening; the place was still busy, and ablaze with lights. Deeming knew it was open all night, but later the crowds of spacemen, shipping clerks, students of navigation, flicker techs and school children would thin out. Wonderful, he thought. If he needed crowds, here they were. If not, not.

At the top of the steps a slender girl in her teens or thereabouts emerged from the door and stopped to answer his automatic smile, radiantly. And to his intense astonishment she sank to one knee and bowed her head.

"Ah, don't, my child—please

don't," said a resonant voice behind him, and a tall Angel swept by him and lifted the girl to her feet. He touched her cheek playfully, smiled and went into the building.

The girl stood looking after him, her hand pressed to her cheek and her eyes bright. "Oh," she murmured, "Oh, I wish . . ."

Then she seemed to become aware of Deeming standing beside and behind her, and stepped to the side in confusion. "I'm so sorry. I'm in your way."

In spite of the fact that he wore the brown uniform of mediocrity—his nondescript suit and pathetic crisp mustache—he said with the voice of Jimmy the Flick, "Finish your wish, pretty. You'll never get a wish that you break in the middle." And he smiled the glittering happy smile that never belonged with the small silly mustache and desk-clerk Deeming's invisible, unnoticeable crowd's face.

Inwardly, he seethed. He had been frightened by the sudden appearance of the Angel; captivated by the girl and the utter adoration which for a crazy moment he had thought was his; intoxicated by the nearness of this last barrier to his quest, hyper-alert because of it. And so for the very first time Jimmy the Flick smiled from the desk-drudge's face, creating a new person whose actions he could not quite predict.

Like the swift glance he threw upward. Why that? Why, the sky, of course: he had felt the shuttering sky move upward a bit, give him room to move. *Well sure*, he thought in a burst of astonishment, *there's much more room to move when you don't know what move you might make next.*

A crazy moment, all this in a click of time, and the girl was taking from him his astonished smile in its mismatched face, and giving it back to him hued with all the tints of herself, saying, "Breaking my wish . . . ? Oh, I did, didn't I?"

She put her hand to her hot throat and looked swiftly into the building where the Angel had disappeared. "I wish I were a boy."

He laughed so abruptly and so loudly that everyone on the steps stopped to catch a piece of it, and go on, smiling. "That's a wish that deserves breaking," he said, making no slightest attempt to hide his admiration of her. She was slender and tall, and had one of those rare gentle faces which can move untouched through any violence.

"But who ever heard of a girl Angel?" she said.

"Oh, so that's your trouble. Now why would you want to be an Angel?"

"To do what they do. I never yet saw an Angel do a thing I wouldn't want to be doing. To help, to be kind and wise and

strong for people who need something strong."

"You don't have to be one of them to learn all those things."

"Oh, yes you do!" she said in a tone that would accept no argument or discussion.

He understood, and grudgingly agreed. Thinking like an Angel did not give one the sheer strength nor the resources to act like one. "Well, even if you could become a man, that wouldn't make you an Angel."

"But then I could get to be one," she said, craning her neck to look far out over the plaza where there was a glimpse of gold from the cloak of another of the creatures. She glowed when she saw it, even so distantly, and brought the glow full on Deeming when she faced him again. It was unsettling as hyperspace.

"Are you sure of that? Were they just plain men before they were Angels?"

"Of course they were," she said with that devoted positiveness. "They couldn't be so much to humans without being human first of all."

"And how do they get to be Angels?" he bantered.

"No one knows that," she conceded. "But you see, if a man can become one, and if I was a man, I'd find out and do it."

He stood in the full radiation of her intense feeling and irrationally admitted that if she were a

man and wanted to be an Angel, or wanted anything else that much, she'd probably make it.

"I'd like to think they were just men, at that," he said.

"You can be sure of it. What's your name?"

"What? Uh—" The strange first fusion of Deeming the Invisible with Jimmy the Flick had him disoriented, and he could not answer. He covered it with a cough, and said, "I've just come in from Bravado to see this place I've heard so much about."

If she noticed that he had avoided her question, or wondered about such a place as Bravado, she gave no sign. The worlds were full of slightly odd people these days, and the sky full of names.

She said, "Oh, may I show it to you? I work here. I'm just off duty, and I really have nothing else to do."

He wished he knew what her name was. He soaked up this eagerness of hers, this total defenselessness, trust, earnest generosity, and felt a great choking wash of feeling of a kind quite alien to him. He cared suddenly, cared desperately about what might happen to her in the years to come, and wished he could spare her whatever would be wrong for her; wished he could run before her and remove anything over which she might stumble; kill anything which might sting her; guard her, warn her.

. . . He wanted to grip her shoulders and shake her and shout, look out for me, beware the stranger; trust no one, help no one, just look out for yourself!

The feeling passed, and he did not touch her or speak of it. He glanced into the building and remembered that there was something he needed in there and must have no matter what he had to use to get it. He would use this girl if he had to; he knew that too. He didn't like knowing it, but know it he most painfully did.

He said, "Well, thanks! It's very kind of you."

"No it isn't," she said with that faith-full ardor of hers. "I love this place. Thank you," and she turned and went in.

He followed numbly.

Hours later he had what he wanted. Or at least, he knew where it was. Among a hundred sections, a hundred thousand file banks, dozens of vista rooms with their three-dimensional maps of all corners of the known cosmos, among museum halls with their displays of artifacts of great, strange, dead, new, dangerous, utterly mysterious cultures of the past and present, there was a course-coin for Revelo—a little button of a thing which a man could hide in his hand, and which bore the skills to pilot him to the Proscribed planet, to the death-field through which, like light

through a pinhole, all his being must now pass, to fan out on the other side and place him in a picture of wealth beyond imagining.

He glanced at the girl walking so confidently beside him and knew again that whatever she was worth, she wasn't important enough to turn him aside, precious enough to spare if she got in his way. And this made him inexpressibly sad.

He saw the banks of course-coin dispensers, where any planet's coin could be acquired by anyone . . . well, almost any planet by almost anyone. Spell out the name of the planet on a keyboard, and in seconds the coin would drop into a glass chamber below the board. Inspect it through the glass, and if it bore the right name, press your thumb into a depression at the right (your thumb would identify you for billing later) and the chamber opened. Or if you'd miscued it and saw the wrong coin, or if you'd changed your mind, then hit the reject button and the coin would be returned to the bank.

So he punched out K-E-T-H, and a blank disc dropped into the chamber. *Proscribed*, a lighted sign under the chamber announced.

"Oh my goodness, you don't want that one!" cried the girl.

"No," said Deeming truthfully—of all planets in the universe,

Keth was the most unspeakable. "I just wanted to see what happened if you punched for it."

"You draw a blank," said the girl, touching the reject button and clearing the chamber. "Prescribed coins aren't even in this area. They're kept separately in a guarded file room. Do you want to see it? Angel Abdasel is the guard; he's so nice."

Deeming's heart leapt. "Yes, I'd like that. But . . . don't make me talk to an Angel. They make me feel . . . you're not going to like this . . ."

"Tell me."

"They make me feel small."

"I'm not angry at that!" she laughed. "They make me feel small too! Well, come on."

They took a grav tube and floated to the upper level of the low building, then walked through a labyrinth of corridors and through a door marked STAFF ONLY, which the girl opened for him, waving him through with mock gestures of pride and privilege. At the end of this corridor was a stairway leading down; Deeming could see the corner of an outer exit down there, and floodlit shrubbery. Near the top of the stairs was an open doorway; through it Deeming got a glimpse of gold. There was an Angel in there.

Deeming stepped close to the wall, out of the Angel's line of sight. "Is this the place?"

"Yes," she said. "Come on—don't be shy; Abdasel's ever so nice." She tapped at the doorpost. "Abdasel . . ."

The resonant voice in the room was warm and welcoming. "Tandy! Come in, child."

So her name's Tandy, thought Deeming dully.

She said, "I've brought a friend. Could we . . ."

"Any friend of—"

Deeming had Rockhard's specially designed needler out before he moved to the doorway. He rested it against the door frame and put his head forward only far enough to sight it with one eye. He fired, and the needle disappeared silently into the broad golden chest. There had been no warning for the Angel, no time.

He bent his head in amazement as if to look at his chest while a hand rose to touch it. The hand simply stopped. The whole Angel stopped.

"Abdasel . . .?" whispered the girl, puzzled. She stepped into the room. "Angel Ab—"

She must then have sensed something new in her companion's tense posture. She turned to him and eyed the needler in his hand, and the frozen Angel. "Did . . . did you—"

"Too bad, Tandy," he rasped. "Too damn bad." He was breathing hard and his eyes burned. He dashed tears away from them with his free hand, furiously.

"You hurt him," she said dazedly.

"He never felt a thing. He'll get over it. . . . You know I have to kill you?" he blurted in sudden agony.

She didn't scream, or faint, or even look horrified. She simply said, "Do you?" in open puzzlement.

He did to her what he had to do without waiting to explain more, not *daring* to wait a second longer for fear he might debate the matter.

He closed his mind down to a single icy purpose and lived solely with it while he pawed over the Angel's desk for an index. He found it—a complete list of Proscribed planets. He recognized the small keyboard beside the computer for what it was, a junior version of the dispensers downstairs, lacking the thumb plate which identified the purchaser.

He took the Angel's hand. The long arm was heavy, stiff, and noticeably cold—not surprising considering the amount of heat-absorbing *athermine* particles which the needle was even yet feeding into his bloodstream. It was enough to freeze an ordinary human solid in minutes, but he had Rockhard's assurance that it would not kill an Angel. Not that he cared, or Rockhard either. For his purposes, the special needle was just as good either way.

He lifted the heavy hand and

used one of its fingers to punch out the names of eight Proscribed planets, among them, of course, Revelo. He scooped them out of the receiving chute and dropped them in his pocket. Then he went to the door and stood holding his breath and listening intently. No sign of anyone in the corridor.

He whipped off his jacket and reversed it, slipped the inserts in his heels, removed the mustache and contact lenses, and stepped out into the corridor. He did not look back, because all he could see whether he looked or not was what lay crumpled on the floor, smiling. *Smiling*, through some accident of spasm . . . a cruel accident which would mark his inner eye, his inner self, forever.

He went downstairs and out into the night, not hurrying.

He walked toward the park, numb inside except for that old, cold unhappiness which always signalized his successes. He remembered thinking that this was only because the take was so small. Well, he'd better think of a better one than that now.

His sky pressed down on his skull and nape. He watched each step he took and knew which step to take next.

It was very dark.

He found the road and then the milepost by the bridge. The people he had passed paid him no attention. When he was quite sure he was unobserved he slipped into

the underbrush and through it to the meadow. He found the sloping ridge at the lip of the gully and moved along it, seeing mostly with his leg muscles and his semi-circular canals. He drew his needler because it was better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it; he moved silently because there was such a thing as a statistical improbability; and when he reached the point over the hiding place of his boat, he got down on his stomach and lay still, listening.

He heard only the gurgle of the water.

He got out his pencil torch, and held it in the same hand as the needler, clamping them tightly together and parallel, so that anywhere the lightbeam struck would be the exact target for a needle. Then walking his elbows, worming his abdomen, he crept to the edge and looked down.

Pitch black. Nothing.

He aimed the needler and the torch as close as he could to where the ship ought to be, put his thumb ready on the stud, and with his other hand found the light switch and clicked it on.

The narrow beam shot downward. He was well oriented. The circle of white picked out the boat and the ground around it, and the figure of the Angel who sat in a patient posture on top of the boat.

The Angel looked up and smiled. "Hello, friend."

"Hello," said Deeming, and shot him. The Angel sat where he was, smiling up into the light, his eyes puckered from the glare. For a long moment nothing happened, and then with head still up, and still smiling, the Angel toppled rigidly off the lifeboat and pitched backward into the rocky stream bed.

Deeming turned out the light and clambered slowly down into the dark. He fumbled his way to the boat, unlocked the canopy with the preset palm pattern, and climbed in. Then he cursed and climbed out again and found the water's edge and fumbled along it until his hands found the soft, strong folds of the golden cloak. He blinked his light once, briefly, and studied the scene as it faded from his retinae. The Angel lay on his back, turned from the hips so that his legs still held the sitting position he had been in when shot. His head was under water.

He heaved the big body, lifted it, shifted it until he was sure it was placed the way he wanted it. A man as big as this Angel would have been a sizable load to move around; the Angel was a third again as heavy as that. (What *are* they, anyway?)

Then he got back into the boat and buttoned it up. He took his stolen course-coins and racked them neatly with the ones the ship already had. And for a while he sat and thought.

Hello, friend.

Her name was Tandy.

(Old eyes, pleading).

"There's a lot of money in yingyang weed."

He shifted in annoyance and pressed his thumbs to his eyes until he saw sparks. These weren't the thoughts he was after.

He ran his hand over the coin rack and slipped his fingers behind it to touch the new flicker-frequency coil which he had plugged in back there. In these tiny objects he had a potential possessed probably by no human being since time began. He had free and secret access to eight Proscribed planets, on some of which there was certainly material for which someone, somewhere, would pay exorbitantly—completely aside from yingyang weed.

He could assume that he would not be traced from Ybo . . . no—no he couldn't. Say rather that as far as he *knew* he couldn't be traced, as far as he *knew* he had not been observed. . . . The stories that were told about the Angels, how they could read minds, even newly dead minds . . . And then, for all their strength and confidence, for all their public stature, did they really feel that one Angel guarding the Proscribed coins would by his sole presence be sufficient to protect such potential devastation as those little discs represented? If he, Deeming, were setting up that

office, Angels or no Angels, he'd put in cameras and alarms . . . and various interlocks, such as a particular rhythm pattern for keying the wanted discs which no outsider could know about.

The more he pursued this line of thought, the less confidence he had that his trail was cold. The more he thought of this, the more sure he became that though they had not followed immediately, they would have nets spread in more places than even his growing fear could conjure up.

What would he do if he were an Angel and wanted to catch the likes of Deeming?

First of all, he'd cordon off the Proscribed planets (assuming that the keyboard had made a record of what coins were taken; and it was unthinkable that it had not).

Then he'd put a watch on every place known to have been a haunt of the criminal—on the growing assumption that they could very soon find out who he was.

In that case, special watches would be put on Rockhard, because the deal with Rockhard would certainly be discovered—it was too complex and involved too many people to be hidden for long, once the Angels had any lead at all.

Which meant that at this instant Earth was out, the Proscribed planets were out, Ybo and Bluebutter and anywhere else he'd

ever been were out. He had to throw them out of ~~stride~~, to go to a new place, somewhere he had never been, where no one would know him, where there were lots of people to disappear among. Somehow, some way, he could think his way through to Don Rockhard and to some, anyway, of the riches the old man had promised him.

He sighed and pawed through the coins on the rack until he came to the one marked Iolanthe. A big planet, a little hard on the muscles for comfort, but well crowded and totally new to him.

He dropped it into the slot and coined out of there.

Iolanthe was really up to the minute. He came out of flicker with about a mile of altitude and took a quick look around before he flicked to the night side. With a design as unique as this ship's, he wouldn't want to leave it where it would cause comment. So he hung in the sky and fanned through the communications the planet had to offer.

There were plenty. There was a fine relief map of the planet on perpetual emanation in conjunction with the space beacon, and a wonderful radio grid, so it was easy to place himself. There was an entertainment band, and best of all, a news band—a broad one, set up in video frames each with its audio loop of comment. He

could tune in any page of the entire sequence. It was indexed and extremely well edited to cover both current news and background, local and intercultural events.

He started with the most recent bulletins and worked backwards. There was nothing, and nothing, and nothing that might apply to him, not even a dateline from anywhere he'd been . . . until suddenly he found himself gaping into the face of Richard E. Rockhard.

He turned up the audio.

" . . . indicted yesterday by C Jury of Earth High Court," said the announcer suavely, "on one hundred and eleven counts of restraint of trade, illegal interlocked directorates, price-pegging, monopoly, market manipulation . . ." on and on and on. Apparently the old pirate had blown his balloon too big.

" . . . value of Mr. Rockhard's holdings has been estimated in excess of two and three quarter billions, but in the face of these charges, it is evident that the satisfaction of invoices outstanding, accounts receivable, taxes and penalties will in all likelihood total to a far higher figure than the assets. These assets are of course in Government hands pending a detailed accounting."

Slowly, his hand shaking, Deeming reached for the control and turned the communicator off.

He watched, fascinated, as the ruddy, cold-eyed face of the old man faded away under his hand, distorted suddenly and was gone. Through a trick of his mind, or of the fading electrons, the picture shimmered as it was extinguished, and for the tiniest fraction of a second it assumed the wordless pleading which had moved him so deeply before.

"Stupid, clumsy old swine," he growled, too shocked to think of anything really foul to say.

He pawed through the money the old man had given him for incidentals. He had used none of it so far, but it no longer looked like a lot. He crammed it back into his pocket, and then shook himself hard.

I got to do something. I got to get down there on the ground and disappear.

He cut in the penetroscope and switched it to the video. The instrument resolved night views considerably better than it did images through beryl steel. He aimed it downward and got a good sharp focus on the ground, and began hunting out a place to hide his boat. He would want hilly or rocky ground, a lot of vegetative cover, access to road or river, and perhaps—

Something golden flashed across the screen.

Deeming grunted and slapped at a control. The camera angle widened and the picture details

shrank as the viewpoint gained altitude. He caught them, lost them, caught and hung on to them—three Angels, flying in V formation close to the ground, with their backpack geopgravs. They were swiftly covering the ground in a most efficient area-search pattern, looking for—well, for something concealed down there, small enough to justify that close scrutiny, sitting mum enough to justify a visual hunt. Something, say, about the size of his boat.

On impulse he cut in the ship detectors. The picture reeled and steadied and reeled again as the detectors scanned and selected, and then gave him a quick run-down of everything it had found, in order of closest estimated arrival time at a collision point with him.

To the north and northeast, two small golden ships converging.

To the east, another—and directly above it, another, apparently maneuvering to fly cover on its partner.

To the south, a large—no, that was nothing, just a freighter minding its own business. But no—it was launching boats. He zoomed the video on them. Fighter-boats, streaking toward him.

To the southeast— The hell with the southeast! He pawed the Revelo coin out of the rack and banged it down on the slot of the



coin box. It bounced out of his fingers and fell to the deck. He pounced on it and scrabbled it wildly into his hand.

A luminescent pink cloud bloomed suddenly to his right, another just behind him. Their significance: stand by for questioning or else.

His hull began to hum, and impressed on this vibration as a signal on a carrier wave, the message came. His whole craft spoke hoarsely to him: "Halt in the name of Angels. Stand by for tow beam."

"Yeah, sure," said Deeming, and this time got the coin to the slot. He banged the button and the scene through ports and video alike disappeared.

He switched off everything he didn't need and lay back, sweating.

He wouldn't even glance at the wanly hopeful possibility that they had mistaken him for someone else. They knew who he was, all right. And how long had it taken them to draw a bead on him on a planet to which they could not possibly have known he was going? Thirty minutes?

He found himself staring out of the port, and became shockingly aware that he was still in hyperspace. He had never been in the gray so long before; where in time was this Revelo place anyway?

He began to sweat again. Was

something wrong with the field generator? According to the tell-tales on the control panel, no; it seemed all right.

Still the queasy, deeply frightening gray. He blanked out the ports and shivered in his seat, hugging himself.

What had made him pick Revelo anyhow?

Only an unconfirmed guess that one man had managed to stay alive there. The other Proscribed planets were death for humans in one form or another; he had no idea which. Revelo probably was too, for that matter, but Don Rockhard would hardly have chanced it if it was certain death.

And then maybe—just barely maybe—the new flicker coil really would work so well in the Revelo death field that he could slip through without detection. Maybe, for a while, for a very little while, he could be in a sheltered place where he could think.

There was a shrill rushing sound from the hull. He stared at the ports, but could see nothing. He switched on the detector and then remembered the port blanks. He opened them and let the light of Revelo flood in. . . .

He had never seen a sky like this. Masses of color, blue, blue-green, pink, drifted above him. The dim zenith was alive with shooting sparks. A great soft purple flame reached from the east-

ern horizon and wavered to invisibility almost directly overhead. It pulsed hypnotically.

And there—there—there is my sky!

Decming set the detector to the task of finding Don Rockhard's boat and let it cruise. He started the exterior air analyzer, and sat back to wait, and to soak himself in that incredible sky.

Since the missing boat was so small and the planet so large, he had to set his detector's discriminator very wide and its sensitivity high. And it found all sorts of things for him—great shining lumps of metallic copper and molybdenum jutting from the rugged hills, a long wavering row of circular pools of molten lead, and even the Angel's warning beacon and death-field generator. It was obviously untended, and understandably so; it was self-powered, fool-proof, and encased in a container that a hydrogen explosion wouldn't nick.

He had to sleep after a while, so he set the buzzer to its loudest and lay back. It seemed that each time he slept he dreamed, and each time he dreamed, no matter how it began, it always ended with his coming face to face with a smiling Angel, unarmed, pleasant, just sitting waiting for him.

Each time the buzzer sounded, he leapt frantically to see what it was reporting. The need to spend a moment with someone

else beside himself, someone else's ideas besides his turgid miasmas of flight and dead smiles and kind relentless Angels became urgent, hysterical, frantic. Each time the buzzer sounded, it was rich ore or a strange electrical fog between two iron crags, or nothing at all . . . and at last Donald Rockhard's lifeboat.

By the time he found it he was in a numb and miserable state, the retreat which lives on the other side of hysteria. He was riding a habit pattern of sleep and dream, wake and stare; hear the buzzer, lurch at the screen, get the disappointment, slap the reject button and go on. He actually rejected the other lifeboat before he realized what it was, and when he brought the craft back, he hovered for a long time staring dully at the tiny bronze ball below, and pulling himself back to reality.

He landed. The craziest thing of all about this crazy place was that the atmosphere at ground level was Earth normal, though a bit warm for real comfort. He unbuttoned the canopy and climbed stiffly out.

There was no sign of Donald Rockhard.

He walked over to the other boat and stooped to look in. The canopy was closed but not locked. He opened it and leaned inside. There were only three course-coins in the rack, Earth and

Bootes II and Cabrini in Beta Centauri. He fumbled behind the rack and his fingers found a flat packet. He opened it.

It contained a fortune—a real fortune in large notes. And a card. And a course-coin.

The card was of indestructible hellenite, and bore the famous symbol of the Surgeons of Grebdl, and in hand script, by some means penetrating all the way through the impcnetrable plastic, like ink through a paper towel, the legend *Class A. Paid in full. Accept bearer without interrogation.* It was signed with an authoritative squiggle and over stamped with the well-known pattern of the Grebdan Surgical Society.

The coin was, of course, to Grebdl.

Deeming clutched the treasure into his lap and bent over it, hugging it, and then laughed until he cried—which he did almost immediately.

To Grebdl, for a new face, a new mind if he wanted it—a tail . . . wings . . . who cares? The sky's the limit.

(The sky—your sky—has always been the limit.)

And then, new face and all, with that packet of loot, to any place in the cosmos that I think is good enough for me. . . .

"Hey! Who are you? What do you think you're doing? Get out of my boat! And drop those things!"

Deeming did not turn. He put up his hands and stopped his ears like a little child in the bird-house at the zoo.

"Out, I said!"

Deeming dropped his hands and picked up the treasure in shaking hands, rumpling and spilling and finally dropping all of it.

"Out!" barked the voice, and out he came, not attempting to pick anything up. He turned tiredly with his hands raised somewhat less than shoulder height, as if they were much, much too heavy for him.

He faced a hollow-cheeked, weather-beaten young man with the wide-set frosty eyes of Richard Rockhard. At his feet a cloth sack lay where he had dropped it on seeing someone in his boat. In his hand, steady as an I-beam, rested a sonic disrupter aimed at Deeming's midsection.

Deeming said, "Donald Rockhard."

Rockhard said, "So?"

Deeming put down his hands, and croaked, "I've come to paint your belly blue."

Rockhard was absolutely motionless for a long moment, and then as if they were operated from the same string, his gun arm slowly lowered while slowly his smile spread.

"Well damn me up and back!" he said. "Father sent you!"

"Man," said Deeming ex-

haustedly, "I'm sure glad you ask questions first and shoot later."

"Oh, I wouldn't've shot you, whoever you were. I'm so glad to see another face that I— Who are you, anyway?"

Decming told him his name. "Your father found out that when a boat like yours busts through the Angel's death-field it turns it inside out. Or some such. Anyway, if you'd coined out of here you never would have come down anywhere."

Donald Rockhard looked up into the magnificent sky, paling. "You don't say." He wet his lips and laughed nervously. It was not a funny sound. "And now that you've come to tell me, how do you get out?"

"Don't look at me like no hero," said Decming with the shade of a grin. "It's only a matter of plugging in a new frack coil. That's what I was doing in your boat when I bumped into all that cabbage. I know I had no business looking it over, but then how often do you bump into four million in negotiable good cash money?"

"Can't blame you at that," Rockhard admitted. "I suppose you saw what else was in there."

"I saw it."

"The theory is that if you plan to go to Grebd, no living soul should know about it."

Decming glanced at the disruper hanging from the young

man's hand. The hand was slack, but then he hadn't put the weapon away either.

He said, "That's up to you. Your father trusted me with the information, though; you ought to know that."

"Well, all right," said Rockhard. He put the gun away. "How is he?"

"Your father? Not so good. I'd say he needs you about now."

"Needs me? Why, if I showed up in the same Solar System and the Angels found out, it'd cost him."

"No it wouldn't," said Decming. He told him what had happened to the old man's towering structure of businesses. "Not that a lousy four million'd do him much good."

Rockhard bit his lips. "What do you think I could get for the card?"

Decming closed his eyes. "That might help," he nodded.

"I got to get out of here," said young Rockhard. "You finished with that coil?"

"Just got the old one out."

"Finish it up, will you? I'll just sort out one or two of these." He dumped the contents of his sack on the ground and hunkered down over them.

"That what you were looking for?" asked Decming, going to his own boat for the coil.

The other snorted. "Who knows? They might be potshcerds

and then again they might be fossilized—mud-puddles. I'll just take the best of 'em for analysis. You think archaeologists are crazy, Deeming?"

"Sure," said Deeming. "But then, I also think everybody's crazy." He came back and lay belly down on the seat of Rockhard's boat, slipped the coil in place, and began picking up money. He got it all and the card and stacked them neatly and slipped them into their packet.

Rockhard glanced in at him.

"You taking some of that for yourself?"

Deeming shook his head. He put the packet on its shelf behind the coin rack. "I've been taken care of." He got out of the boat.

Rockhard got in, and looked up over his shoulder at him. "You better take some. A lot."

"I won't be needing it," said Deeming tiredly.

"You're a funny guy, Deeming."

"Yuk, yuk."

"Will I see you again?"

"No."

When Rockhard had no answer to that flat syllable, Deeming said, "I'll swing your canopy." Under cover of reaching for the canopy, he got out his needler and concealed it in his sleeve, with the snout just protruding between the fingers of his closed fist. His little finger rested com-

fortably on the stud. He leaned on the fist, resting on the cowering right back of Rockhard's ear.

He said, "Good bye, Rockhard."

Rockhard didn't say anything. . . .

Deeming stood for a long time looking down at the needler in a kind of dull astonishment. *Why didn't I shoot?* Then he dropped his hands and let his shoulders hang and he slogged through the hot sand to his boat—which, with Don Rockhard gone, was all that was human on this lousy Proscribed planet with the wild, wonderful sky.

God he was tired . . .

"Why didn't you shoot?"

Deeming stopped where he was, not even finishing a stride, one foot forward, the other back. Slowly he raised his head and faced the golden giant who leaned casually, smiling, against his boat.

Deeming took a deep breath and held it and let it out painfully. Then in a harsh flat voice he said, "By God, I can't even say I'm surprised."

"Take it easy," said the Angel. "You're going to be all right now."

"Oh sure," said Deeming bitterly. They'd scrape out his brains and fill his head with cool delicious yogurt, and he'd spend the rest of his placid life mopping out the Angel's HQ, wherever that might be.

"Here," he said, "I guess you won this fair and square," and

he tossed his needler to the Angel, who waved a negligent hand. The weapon ceased to exist in midair halfway between them.

Deeming said, "You have a whole *bag* of tricks."

"Sure," said the Angel agreeably. "Why didn't you shoot young Rockhard?"

"You know," said Deeming, "I've been wondering about that myself. I meant to. I was sure I meant to." He raised hollow, bewildered eyes to the Angel. "What's the matter with me? I had it made, and I threw it away."

"Tell me some more things," said the Angel. "When you shot that Angel on Ybo and he fell with his head underwater, why did you take the trouble to drag him out and stretch him on the bank?"

"I didn't."

"I saw you. I was right there watching you."

"The hell you were," said Deeming; looking at the Angel's eyes, and knew that the Angel meant what he said. "Well, I—I don't know. I just did it, that's all."

"Now tell me why you knocked out that girl with your fist instead of killing her and covering your tracks."

"Her name was Tandy," said Deeming reflectively. "That's all I remember about it."

"Let's go way back," said the Angel easily. "When you left old

Rockhard's place for an evening to clean up your affairs, you put a watch in a package and put it in the mail. Who'd you send it to?"

"Can't recall."

"I can. You mailed it back to the woman you stole it from. Why, Deeming?"

"Why, why, why! I always did that, that's why!"

"Not always. Only when it was a watch which was all the woman had left of her dead husband, or something of equal value. You know what you are, Deeming? You're a softy."

"You're having yourself a time."

"I'm sorry," said the giant, gently. "Deeming, I didn't win, as you just put it. *You've won.*"

"Look," said Deeming, "You've caught up with me and I'll get mine. Let's let it go at that and skip the preaching, all right? Right. Let's go. I'm tired."

"Go?" said the Angel. "We're *here.*" He waved his hand and Deeming at last saw the real nature of Revelo—its buildings, its parks, its limitless sky . . . and its population of Angels. "This is our planet, Deeming. And welcome."

The Angel put out both hands, fingers slightly spread. Deeming tingled. He distinctly heard two sharp cracks as his spine stretched and resealed itself. He looked up sharply.

"Tired now?" smiled the Angel.

Deeming touched his own forearms, his eyelids.

"No," he breathed. "By God, no, I'm not." He cocked his head and said reluctantly, "That's the first one of your tricks I've liked, shorty." He stared at the jovial golden man. "Just what *are* you guys, anyway . . . ? Oh, all right," he said immediately, "I know, I know. That's the question you never answer. Skip it."

"You can ask it." Disregarding Deeming's stupefied, slack-jawed astonishment at that, the Angel said, "Once we were a strong-arm squad. Sort of a small private army, if you can understand that. All through history there've been mercenaries. Once there was a thing called the Pinkerton man. You wouldn't know about that—it was before your time. Our outfit was operated originally by a man called Angell—with two L's, and we were called Angell's, with an apostrophe ess. So the name really came before the fancy clothes and the Sunday School kind of activity we go in for now."

"And as time went on we recruited more carefully and improved our rank and file . . . and in the meantime our management became less and less, until finally we didn't have a management. Just us, and an idea that we could stop a lot of trouble if we could make people be kind to one another."

"You've sometimes got an off-

beat way of being kind!"

"People used to shoot a horse with a broken leg. It was kind," said the Angel.

"So why do you tell me all this?"

"I'm recruiting."

"What?"

"Recruiting," the Angel said clearly. "Mustering new men. Making new Angels. Like you, if you're interested."

"Aw, now, wait a mucking minute here," said Deeming. "You're not going to stand there and tell me you can turn me into an Angel! Not me, you're not."

"Why not?"

"Not me," said Deeming doggedly. "I'm not the Angel type."

"You're not? What type is a man so big he can't live one life at a time, but has to play the inverted *and* upside down Robin Hood for the people? Were you aware that you never stole from anyone who did not, in the long run, benefit by it, learn something from it—and, if he'd lost something of real importance, he always got it back?"

"Is that really so?"

"I can show you a case-history of every single one of them."

"You've been on to me for that long?"

"Since you were in third grade."

"Cut it out," said Deeming. "You'd have to be invisible."

The Angel disappeared. Blinking, Deeming walked slowly over

to the hull and ran his hand over it.

"Not that that's so marvellous," said the Angel's voice from mid-air, "once you know how it's done. Do you know any reason why a flicker-field shouldn't be refined down to something the size of your fist?"

Deeming whirled and saw nothing. He backed against the boat, wide-eyed.

"Over here," said the Angel cheerfully, and reappeared to the right. He drew back his cloak and turned down his waistband. Deeming briefly glimpsed a small curved, flat plastic pack of some kind.

"You've got to understand," said the Angel, "that human beings, by and large, are by nature both superstitious and reverent. If you substitute science for their theology, they'll just get reverent about the science. All we do is give them what they want anyway. We never pretend to be anything special, but neither do we deny certain things they think about us. If they think we're power-hungry slave-traders, we prove they're wrong. If they think we're demigods or better, we don't say anything at all.

"It works out. There hasn't been a war in so long that half the population couldn't define the word. And we came along when we were needed most, believe me . . . when we were expanding

against and through extra-terrestrial cultures. The word had to be spread, or damn well else."

"Just exactly what is the word? What are you really after?"

"I've already told you, but it sounds so confounded simple that nobody will believe it until they see it in action, and then they find some other way to describe it. I'll try you again," said the Angel, chuckling. "The word is, *be kind to each other*. . . . It opened the sky."

"I have to think about that," said Deeming, overwhelmed. He shook it off. "Later, I'll think about it. . . . I hear things about you people. I hear you don't eat."

"That's so."

"Or sleep."

"True. We don't breed either; we haven't yet been able to work out a treatment to let us take on women as Angels, though we'll make it some day. We're not a species or a race, or supermen, or anything like that. We're descendants, out of sadism by technology, of the yingyang weed."

"Yingyang!"

"Our dark and deadly secret," said the Angel, laughing. "You know what the drug does to people who take it uncontrolled. In the right hands, it's no more addictive than any other medicine. And you see, Deeming, you don't, you just *don't* increase intelligence by a factor of five and fail to see that people must be kind

to one another. So the word, as I've recalled it, isn't a doctrine as such, or a philosophy, but simply a dictate of logic. By the way, if you decide against joining us, don't spread the word in public about yingyang weed, or you'll get yourself clobbered out of thin air."

"What did you say? What?" said Deeming in a rising voice. "If I decide *against*. . . Have I a choice?"

"Can you honestly conceive of our forcing you to get people to be kind to each other?" asked the Angel soberly.

Deeming walked away and walked back again, eyes closed, pounding a fist into his other hand. "Well, you don't force me; fine. But I still have no choice. I'll take your word for it—though it'll be a *long* time before it really sinks in—that you boys are off my back. But I can't go back to that mess on Earth, with all old Rockhard's affairs churning around and the Government poking into all his associations, and—"

"What mess did you say?" asked the Angel, and laughed. "Deeming, there isn't any mess."

"But Rockhard—"

"There isn't any Rockhard. Did you ever hear of any Rockhard before that fat boy called on you that night?"

"Well no, but that doesn't mean—oh, wait—it *does* mean

. . . year . . . But what about the big smashup, all Rockhard's affairs; it was in all the newscasts, it said right there—"

"In how many newscasts?"

"When I was on Iolanthe! I saw it myself when— Oh . . . Oh. A private showing."

"You were in no position to be suspicious," the Angel excused him kindly.

"I'll say I wasn't. Your flyboys were about to knock me out of the sky. I could've been killed."

"Right."

"Matter of fact, suppose I'd kept my mouth shut when I was welded up in the landing foot of that ship? I might be there yet!"

"Correct."

"And if I'd bobbled that job on Ybo, I could have caught a disrupter beam."

"Just get used to it and you won't be so indignant. Certainly you were in danger. Everything was set up so that you had right and wrong choices to make, and a great deal of freedom in between. You made the right choices and you're here. We can use you. We couldn't use a man who might jump the wrong way in an emergency."

"And so Rockhard was one of you, and Don . . . I suppose that Tandy—"

"Not Tandy. She was your own discovery."

There was a quiet time while Deeming stared at the colors, the

size of the skies of Revlo.

"They say you're immortal," said Deeming abruptly.

"Nonsense!" said the Angel. "That's just a rumor, probably based on the fact that none of us has died yet. I don't doubt that we will."

"Oh," said Deeming, and started to think of something else. Then the full impact of what he had just heard reached him. He whispered, "But there have been gold-cloaked Angels around for two thousand years!"

"Twenty-three hundred," said the Angel.

"For that you stop breeding," said Deeming, and added rudely, "Tell me, Gramps, is it worth it?"

"In all kindness," beamed the Angel, "I do believe you should have three of your teeth knocked down your throat, to guard you against making such remarks in the presence of someone who might take it less kindly than I do."

"I withdraw the remark," said Deeming, bowing low; and when he straightened up his face was puckered up like that of a child wanting to cry, but hanging on tight. "I have to make gags about it, sir. Can't you see that? Or I—I—"

"All right, boy. Don't let it worry you . . . it's a big thing to meet without warning. D'ye think I've forgotten that?"

They stood for a while in com-

panionable silence. Then, "How long do I have to make up my mind?"

"As much time as it takes. You've qualified, you understand that? Your invitation is permanent. You can only lose it by breaking faith with me."

"I can't see myself starting a movement to persuade people to hate each other. Not after this. And I'm not likely to talk. Who'd listen?"

"An Angel," said the golden one softly, "No matter whom you were talking to. Now—what do you want to do?"

"I want to go back to Earth."

The Angel waved at the boat. "Help yourself."

Deeming looked at him and bit his lip. "Don't you want to know why?"

The Angel silently smiled.

"It's just that I have to," blurted Deeming protestingly. "I mean, all my damn miserable years I've been afraid to live more than half a life at a time. Even when I created a new one, for kicks, I shut off the original while it was going on. I want to go back the way I am, and learn how to be as big as I am." He leaned forward and tapped the Angel's broad chest. "That—is—pretty damn big. If I let you make me into what you are, I'd go back larger than life size. I want to be just life size for a time. I think that's what I mean. You don't

have to be an Angel to be big. You don't have to be any more than a man to live by the word, for that matter." He fell silent.

"How do you know what it's like to be what you call 'life size'?"

"I did it for about three minutes, standing on the steps of the Astro Central on Ybo. I was talking to—"

"You could go back by way of Ybo."

"She wouldn't look my way, except to have me arrested," said Deeming. "She saw me shoot an Angel."

"Then we'll have that same Angel arrest you, and restore her faith in us."

Deeming never reached Earth. He was arrested on Ybo and the arresting Angel draped him over a thick forearm and displayed him to the girl Tandy. She watched Angel Abdasel stride off with Deeming and ran after them.

"What are you going to do with him?"

"What would you do?"

They looked at each other for a time, until the Angel said to Deeming, "Can you tell me honestly that you have something to learn from this girl, and that you're willing to learn it?"

"Oh, yes," said Deeming.

"Teach him what?" cried the girl in a panic. "Teach him how?"

"By being yourself," Deeming said, and when he said that the Angel let go of him.

"Come see me," the Angel said to Deeming, "three days after this is over."

It was over when she died and after they had lived together right there on Ybo for seventy-four years; and in the three days after it was over, rich in the memory of a full and fruitful life, he was able to sit among his great-grandchildren and with no regrets think about what he'd be doing next.

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jury-rig

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

"He hasn't got all his marbles," allowed Doc Damon.

"Is there a chance he can be helped?" asked the judge.

"Do not be un-kreelhth," said Elmer reproachfully.

And the day was filled with yellow flame. . . .

DOC DAMON AND JUDGE PELTZ were at it again.

"If you'd just for once—*once* is all I ask—just one single time read that there where Harry Stack Sullivan says—" Judge Peltz pleaded.

A grimace and a wave of the hand. "Never mind that. Harry S. Sullivan or John L. Sullivan, that's no concern of ours. I want to ask you one single, simple question: Is he either a danger to himself or a danger to the community?" Doc Damon glared out of red-rimmed poached-egg eyes. "Hey? Yea or nay?"

The judge shook his head rapidly.

"You'd think I dint *like* the fellow or something," he said, ag-grievedly. "You act as though I was being contemptable tords your own talents or something," he said. "No: All I say, *is* . . ."

The peninsula sticks out from the Pacific coast just enough to hook around and make a harbor. The town used to be a lumbering port—it still is a lumbering town, but the timber goes out by rail or truck now. Sometimes at night, though, down near the wharves, with the fog coming in gray and soft and cool, and the brackish smell of the bay, and the scent of the wood, and the sound of the seals ooping and yerping—sometimes it seems as if it still *is* a port. Then the place isn't a town, it's a city, a small city, but a *port* city; and the air smells of distant places, and the tall cylinder which burns up the sawdust might be Stromboli if you see it from the right perspective.

But in the daytime, when you hear the rasp of the saw, and the rattle and the dull *bonk-bonk* of the flat-cars thudding together as

they back and fill in the yards, and you notice how many of the stores are boarded up shut, and if you know anything about the lumber business—then you soon realize that not such a hell of a lot of lumber is going out of the place anyway, by rail or by truck, and you know the arrival of a ship is almost as infrequent as a presidential election.

During the course of their argument Doc Damon and Judge Peltz had passed slowly into the lumber yard, passed the big saw and the sheds where the green timber was drying, crossed the tracks, and came at last to the sawdust burner.

"Hi, Elmer," the doctor said. A short man in clean overalls a size too big for him looked up at them. "How are you today, Elmer?"

"Day, day," the man said, cheerfully—very cheerfully, almost mirthfully. "Lololo. Pleasingness. My, yes. If have kreelth."

"See?" the judge hissed in his companion's ear. "WhadItellya? Neologisms!"

The doctor pulled away with a testy expression on his face. He put the tip of his little finger in his ear and moved it vigorously. "Damn it, Al, I wish you wouldn't—What? Yes, yes: I'm *quite* familiar with the phenomenon. It don't mean a thing—except that he hasn't got all his marbles. Which is by no means news."

Judge Peltz's mouth set, then

unset, in his horse-long face. "It's a schizoid characteristic," he said, doggedly. "Sullivan points out—"

The doctor waved to a passing workman. Then he said, "Listen. Do I try to teach you law?"

Elmer beamed at them. "Nice day, hey? Nice town, nice sawdust—" He picked up a handful of the stuff (before the burners were installed the sawdust seemed likely to engulf the town); he sifted it lovingly through his fingers. "—nicc people. One day—gren-a-mun-dun." He seemed just the merest bit regretful. The judge cleared his throat.

"Uh—tcllus, Elmer—what does 'gren-a-mun-dun' mean? Hmm? Tell us?"

The doctor snorted. Elmer considered, rubbed his chin, raised his eyebrows. "Gren-a-mun-dun? It's like . . . um . . . cupra. But not for *all* the time cupra." And he beamed, turned back to his task of burning up sawdust.

"I trust that you are satisfied, Alfred?" the doctor asked. The day was warm, but now and then a cool breeze came up from the bay, and the sound of the seals with it.

The judge said, well, he wasn't. From his pocket he took a small notebook and a pencil.

"'Gren-a-mun-dun'," he muttered, writing. "I gottem all down here. And some day I'm writing to a member of the medical profession whose mind isn't closed to all the progress that's been made

in recent years . . . Kreelth . . . tal-a-wax-na . . . estenral . . . I gottem all noted down here. Sometimes he just repeats the old ones, but today he used two more: Gren-a-mun-dun and cupra."

Damon shook his head. "Elmer is happy," he said. "The company is happy with him. He has not an enemy in the world. What do you want, Alfred?"

Elmer pattered around the base of the tall metal sawdust-burner with a few tools. "Kreelth," he muttered.

Judge Alfred Peltz said he wanted to know two things. "One: Is there any chancee he might ever become *dangerous*? Two: Is there a chance he can be *helped*?"

The doctor rubbed his rufous eyes. He groaned. "Never let well enough alone, will you? Just like my damned old Uncle, Freddy Damon. Thought the sailingmen were a bad influence on the town. Wouldn't rest till he'd got the railroad in. The day they drove the last spike, what happened? Drunken gandy-dancer sets fire to a box-car, burns up half the town—including—" he poked his finger in the judge's sternum—"my damned old uncle, Freddy Damon. . . . Hapastwo," he said, abruptly. "I got to get back to my office. You drove me here, now you drive me back."

They started off. Doc half-turned. "Slong, Elmer. Begood."

"Gren-a-mun-dun," Elmer muttered, absent-mindedly, scraping a bolt.

When the lcase of Pighafetti the ship-chandler ran out, he didn't even bother to hold a Going Out Of Business sale. What stock was left in the shop stayed there. Most of it still remained when Tom Wong moved in because *his* lease had run out. Shipping and fishing might be shot to hell, but folks still had to eat. Knowing the value of the picturesque, Tom had simply redistributed the stuff; and so nets and coils of line and glass globes and ships' lanterns and a lot of similar equipage hung from the walls and ceiling.

"Yeah, I guess that's right, Judge," Tom observed. They were sitting at a table under an eel-trap. "Now when I was a kid, my father used to take me to an old Chinese man who stuck needles into me—gold needles, silver needles. Oh, it *worked*—but nowadays I see to it that my kids get penicillin, because, like you say, we gotta Move With The Times. . . . How about trying today's Special? Curried shrimp." At the judge's nod, he signalled to his wife.

Judge Peltz put a cigarette in his mouth, groped around for a match. On the table by the ash-tray with a pregnant dragon coiled around it was a book of paper matches, imprinted *Tom Wong's*

Waterfront Inn; but the judge liked kitchen matches. He brought out the entire contents of his coat-pocket, not being able to disentangle the match, and dumped them on the table: a piece of fishing line, the pencil stubs, a glueless postage stamp, a few matches, and his little notebook. He pulled a match loose, lit his cigarette. The notebook reminded him—

"Now, it's an odd thing, Tom," he said, "how some people can't see the forest for the trees. I suppose you must meet up with people in the restaurant business world who are perfectly content to go right on doing just like they did thirty years ago?"

Tom nodded vigorously. His eyeglasses flashed. "Boy, don't I just!" he agreed. "Judge, those very words describe my wife's Uncle Ong, who's got that lunchroom over at the county seat. When I put in the dishwashing machine the salesman offered me a special price if I'd get *two*. Well, gee, I mean—so I asked her uncle, How's about it? But no—he's used to having the dishes washed by hand and he didn't see any reason to change. Get's in these hoboos and winoes and odd-ball characters and by and by they *leave* him, so you'd think—But no. I said, Ah, come *on*, Uncle Ong, don't be an old stick-in-the-mud. So he started cussing me out in Chinese and yelling not to forget the Eight Virtues and that kind of stuff . . ."

The judge, who had hoped for a single "Yes" only, listened. The moment Tom stopped he said, "Well, there you are. It's very sad. And how'd it be if the whole country was like that? Now, you take psychiatry, for example. What strides have been made in it! What marvelous recent discoveries!"

Old Ong's nephew said, "Boy, you bet!"

Growing enthusiastic, the Judge went on, "Now, you take for instance, I was reading some while back an article in the *Reader's Digest*—"

"That's a great magazine. I read it all the time. It's triffic."

"And it was describing the work of the late Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan of whom I'm sure you've heard." Wong made a non-committal, encouraging noise. "You know much about the schizoid personality, Tom?" the judge asked.

The restaurateur wiggled in a fit of embarrassment. "Well, um, *no*, Judge. Y'see, The Business keeps me pretty busy, except for Sunday morning and I like to sleep late then fi get the chance. I was saying to my wife only last week, Judge, 'Priscilla,' I says, 'Can't you keep those kids quiet just—'"

Pushing the curried shrimp to one side and speaking rather loudly, Judge Alfred Peltz said, "This type of personality suffers from what you call a profound

disassociation of ideas, I think. They retreat from Reality. See? They use Neologisms—what I mean, words that *nobody* knows what they mean, like . . ." He opened the little notebook. "Kreelth."

Tom Wong smiled. He chuckled. "Kreelth," he repeated. "What kind of people did you say they were, Judge? I mean, where do they come from? Because that's what this simple-minded guy that washes dishes in my wife's Uncle Ong's lunchroom says all the time. Everytime they bring him a pile of dirty dishes he says it."

Old Mr. Woodrow Ong shook his head and waved his hand when Judge Peltz and Doc Damon came into his lunchroom.

"Closed up," he announced. "Too late. Closed up. Oh. Judge. Hello, Judge." He glanced at the clock, sighed, struggled with his Confucian respect for the figure of The Magistrate. "Sandwich?" he suggested, feebly. "Cup coffee?" He sighed again, surrendered. "Appoo pie, boo-berry, coconut custard, lemon mo-ang—"

The swinging doors of the kitchen opened and a man about Elmer's age and size came out, rolling down his sleeves. "Dishes finish," he said, and then saw the two newcomers. He took in a deep, resigned breath. "Kreelth," he said softly.

Judge Peltz looked trium-

phantly at Doc Damon. He consulted his little notebook. "Lololo," he said, tentatively. The dishwasher smiled. He chuckled at "gren-a-mun-dun" and "cupra". When the judge stumbled over "tal-a-wax-na", he corrected him happily.

"Fantastic!" said the judge. "Identical neologisms!" For once the doctor listened without demur.

"All right. Bring him along with us. Let's get the two of them together and see—whatever it is," Doc Damon said.

Old Mr. Ong watched them get into the car. He shrugged. Then he locked up, turned out all lights but one. An unfamiliar clicking noise in the kitchen drew his attention. He traced it to the garbage disposal unit, lifted out the mechanism. Its inward parts were a mystery to him, always had been. The devil-device clicked once again as he looked at it warily. A little parti-colored disk fell out of it, then another. They dropped to the floor. The cat strolled over, sniffed, licked, then began to eat.

Mr. Ong shrugged. He replaced the mechanism. "Let well enough alone" had always been his motto. The garbage disposal unit clicked one last time, then went silent as the last of the garbage emerged in the form of something resembling a Necco wafer, or a poker chip. Mr. Ong took a can of cold beer from the ice-box and went

upstairs to watch Charlie Chan on the Late, Late Movie.

Jack Girard, the manager of the lumber yard, was agreeable, though puzzled. He leaned out of the car window and said to the watchman, "The four of us are going up to the sawdust-burner for a while, Tib—in case muh wife calls nasks."

The judge asked, "How come they *burn* the sawdust, Jack, instead of making a lot of what-chacallits?"

Girard shrugged. "Compny Policy is Burn It. So that's whut we do. We burn it."

The judge's forehead, ridged and bumpy with thought, suddenly cleared.

"'By-Products!' That's what they call it, the stuff you can make from sawdust. How come your company don't convert all this good sawdust into By-Products, huh, Girard?"

"Such as what?" The doctor took over the task of answering from the foreman who—faced with the fearful thought of questioning Company Policy—shook his head, aghast.

"Ohhhh . . ." The judge, trying to recall what he had in mind, rolled the syllable *and* his eyes. ". . . stuff with names like Butyn Mephlutyn, or Bophane Hyperstannis, or *Something* like that . . ."

The yellow glare of a single

lamp mingled with the red glare of the tall burner itself. Girard hopped out and held the door open for the others. "I still don't know what you intend to try and prove," Doc Damon complained, as he bent his head and slid out.

"I'm not sure, myself," the judge admitted. "Okay, Joe, here we are—" The dishwasher (his Social Security card listed his name as Joe Jones), humming tunelessly to himself, got out and looked around. Girard strolled over to the burner. He examined a piece of piping on the side and frowned.

"What's *this*?" he asked.

Doc Damon said, indifferently, that it was part of the sawdust-burner.

The manager said the hell it was. "Elmer!" he called. "Hey, Elmer?"

Over their heads a voice called out cheerfully, "Lololo!" Their eyes swung up to see the short figure in overalls coming down the rungs set in the side of the cylinder. In a moment he was on the ground. "I just fix the wag-mal," he said. "Takes much krelth—much krelth."

The dishwasher stepped forward. He said, "Lololo." He and Elmer exchanged wide smiles, spoke together rapidly. Then Girard tapped the piping.

"Who put this on here, Elmer?" he asked.

"I."

"You? Well, how *come*?"

"Tal-a-wax-na. Of course, not *best* kind tal-a-wax-na, but—" he shrugged. "It be okay for long enough."

Girard gaped. The doctor said, "Oh, here we go again. Look, now, Jack: the machine still burns sawdust, don't it? So what do you care if old Elmer sticks a hootenanny on it? You'll be as bad as old Judge Peltz here if you keep on—reading the Reader's Digest and all."

Joe Jones, the dishwasher, walked around the base of the burner. Reappearing, he felt the pipe, nodded in a satisfied sort of way.

A sudden thought struck Elmer. "Klommerkaw?" he asked. "You get klommerkaw ready?"

Joe nodded, held up the shopping bag he had brought with him from the kitchen of Ong's Eats. He reached in his other hand, brought it out filled with little parti-colored disks.

"Some new kind of Necco Wafers?" hazarded Doc Damon. "Poker chips to while away the hours? Nope—no cards . . . Well, whadda ya know?" His voice faded into a surprised silence as the dishwasher broke one in half, gave part to Elmer. They put the halves in their mouths, chewed ruminatively, swallowed.

"Very good klommerkaw," said Elmer. "Plenty, too."

"Now, look-a-here," Girard pro-

tested, "I'm responsabull to thuh owners for all this here *e*-quipment, and I gotta know what is that pipe *for*?"

Joe Jones looked at him. "Kreelth," he said. There was just a slight touch of reproach in his voice. "Do not be un-kreelth." He put his hand on the piping and directed his next remark to Elmer. "Wagmal fix? Estanrel?"

Elmer said, "Wagmal just now fix good."

Jones gave the piping a light twist—a gentle tug, really—his hand moved so quickly, so oddly. "Estanrel," he said.

Girard said, "*Uh*."

The side of the sawdust-burner opened where no opening had been.

"Obbertaw," said Elmer, firmly, holding back. Joe Jones went inside. So did Elmer. For a moment Jones' face looked at them. He smiled.

"Cupra," he said. "Cupra."

"But not cupra for all the time." Elmer explained. "Only gren-a-mun-dun. We come back. Have kreelth, you see we come back some time to nice town, nice people, nice sawdust."

And the opening closed. The red glare of the burning sawdust turned yellow. The whoofing noise of the draft turned shrill. A sudden gust of cool wind came from the bay. And then, with a subdued, polite sort of swish, the sawdust burner separated itself

from the ground and went up. . . . and anything else I can get away with," he concluded.

They had a rather bad first five minutes of it. Finally, with the help of the *spiritus frumenti* in Doctor Damon's bag, the three men began slowly to recover.

"The way I see it—" Doc Damon was the first to say anything besides "Jesus", and "Gimme that bottle"—"the way I see it: those two fellas must've been sort of ship-wrecked here. Probably way, way back in the woods there's a twisted mass of metal somebody will come across one of these days."

The judge said, "Ohboyohboyohboy."

Girard said, "Gimme that bottle."

"So they did what any experienced mariner would do—they improvised—fixed up what you might call a jury-rigged vessel . . . At least, Elmer did. Guess he was the Chief Engineer. Maybe Joe Jones was the purser or supercargo."

"All I have to say," the judge announced firmly, "is that it never happened and if either of you say it *did*—say it out *open*, I mean—I'll do my damndest to see to it that you get indicted, prosecuted, convicted, and *severely* sentenced, for barratry, simony, unlawful usurpation

"How'm I gunna explain why we're a sawdust-burner short?" Girard moaned.

"Condemned as a health menace," Doc Damon said, crisply. "No, no, Alfred, I won't say a word. But sooner or later everyone will know. They'll be *back*. Don't you *know* that? They'll be back for some more nice sawdust, because it looks like they have a way to get a By-Product out of sawdust to beat all By-Products. That Butyn Merphlutyn, or Bophane Hyperstannis, must be powerful stuff, yes-sir."

Judge Peltz asked, "And in the meantime we just *wait*? Isn't there something we can *do*, now that we know?"

Doc Damon said, "Well . . . If you hear of any other happy morons with neologistic tendencies, we might pay them a visit. You never know . . . And until then, and meantime: have kreelth."

Sometimes at night, when the fog makes the slates of the sidewalk wet and glistening, or even when the cold wind blows up and clears the sky and shows the burning white stars, at such times the place isn't a town, it's a city—though a small one—it's a *port* city, and the air smells of distant places.

FEATHERBED ON CHLYNTHA

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

When Iri sighed, it was easy to see that the Chlynthans were mammals. Still, I found it a bit unsettling to hear that Chlyntha was counting on one Earthman to replenish its population. . . .

I HAD JUST SETTLED DOWN to sleep in my cage after the evening inquisition when I heard the back door open softly, and Iri came in. It's never really dark on Chlyntha at night because of their two moons, but I'd have known anyway who it was—no mistaking that crest of blue-black iridescent feathers or those flashing amber eyes.

"Are you awake, space creature?" she whispered.

They knew, of course, that I could speak their language, because I obeyed orders. They'd never bothered to learn mine, any more than a man bothers to learn a dog's. Theirs is rather a simple tongue and I'd picked it up in a few months from listening to the conversation in the crowds gathered in front of my cage in the zoo in the daytime. But I seldom spoke it to them—they did all the talking.

However, if Iri was paying me a private visit I figured she rated

a reply. So I yawned and said: "Yes. What do you want?"

She sat down, but I noticed she kept one hand on the open door in case I got violent. Maybe she was smart at that; I hadn't seen another girl on Chlyntha with her looks, and it had been a year now since I'd seen a woman of my own kind. But I was too beaten down to be much of a menace.

Iri leaned forward until the feathers on her crest tickled my shoulder. I drew away and apparently that gave her more confidence.

"Why do you think you're here, space creature?" she asked. "What do you think we're trying to find out when we give you all those tests every evening?"

"As to the first," I answered stiffly, "I'm here because I was kidnapped. As to the second, how should a subhuman creature from outer space understand the purposes of the scientists of Chlyntha?"

She frowned—I could see the feathery eyebrows knit above the amber eyes.

"None of that," she said sharply. "We've tested your intelligence, you know, besides everything else. You are distinctly humanoid, even if you're not really human."

"Very well, then. I haven't the slightest idea why you're putting me through this performance, unless it's just plain scientific curiosity. . . .

"After all," I added in my own language, "I'm a scientist too, and I can understand an interest in pure science." I said that deliberately to find out if she understood any Terran at all. Apparently she didn't.

"Speak Chlynthan!" she commanded. "You speak it quite intelligibly, in spite of your accent. That's one of the main factors in our decision that you have a relatively high intelligence."

"Thanks," I said. Naturally I hated them all, but I hated Iri the least. You don't hate as pretty a girl as that, even if she has feathers instead of hair and twelve fingers and twelve toes. Those were the only differences I'd been able to discover—outwardly at least, which was all I saw—between us and them.

I had been minding my own business, that day a year—one of their years—before, tooling along in my little one-seater between

one Mars colony and the next, when I was snatched. My special field is fourth-generation Martian colonists. There's mighty little social anthropology left to do on Earth; we've observed, checked, rechecked, researched, described, till there isn't an ethnic group left that hasn't been investigated down to the last myth and the last folk-art. But opening up the other planets gave us anthropologists a new lease of life—now we have not only the remains of the extinct Martians to study, and the primitive carbon-breathing Venerians (the latter under difficulties, I acknowledge), but also the changes brought about by even four generations of life in our colonies on Mars and the Moon. I had a pretty good position for a man of only 31—half a year studying in the Mars colonies, the other half back on Earth in a college teaching job with time enough besides to put my findings on microtape. Now, thanks to Iri's people and their damned starships, I was just an exhibit in a zoo on Chlynthia.

"What we've been testing most—" her voice snapped me back from my bitter reflections—"is the sexual equipment of your species."

"Oh, yes?" I said in Terran. "Well, how about a practical demonstration, baby?" But this might be important, and I started to listen more closely.

"I don't suppose you can see past the front bars of your cage," Iri went on, with only an impatient wave of the hand for what she must have suspected was a verbal pass. "But you're far from our only specimen at present, though you're the most humanoid one, and therefore the most valuable. We've been scouting for years, ever since the population problem became serious—sending out scout ships all over the Galaxy, and picking up likely-looking samples. Ideally, where there is apparently a bisexual system, we ought to collect one of each sex, but so far we haven't been so lucky. You do have females on your planet, where we collected you, don't you?"

"To begin with, that wasn't my planet; I come from another planet of that solar system. And yes, my dear Iri, we do have females; I wish I had one right now. Incidentally, I have a name, and I don't like being called 'space creature.'"

"Of course," she said blandly. "Prizing one's special individuality is a common primitive characteristic that you'd naturally have. But you've never told us your name; what is it?"

"You've never asked. It's Duncan Kcith. And I've heard them call you Iri."

"Oh, that. It doesn't mean me, particularly; it's the designation of my work on the laboratory

staff. We have official names, but we seldom use them. I'm perfectly willing to call you Duncan-kcith."

"Just Duncan will do."

"As I said, most of the other specimens we've gathered have been so far from human that they could teach us nothing that would be of use in solving our problem. In fact, except for you, the present lot isn't worth bothering with, and we've finished examining them and are ready to dispose of them."

"Dispose?"

"Get rid of them," she said coolly. "Just as soon as the next scout ships come back, if they have enough on board to build up the zoo as a public attraction, we'll kill off this lot and mount and stuff them for the Space Museum. You're fortunate that you're worth further study."

"I don't suppose it would occur to you to return us poor devils to where we came from when you're through with us, would it?" I inquired sarcastically.

She smiled—and damn it, when she smiled there were two cute little dimples—

"Hardly," she said crisply. "It's a very expensive project as it is; we're not going to waste more money sending the specimens back. Besides, there is always the possibility that some day some other race somewhere in the Galaxy might reach the starship stage, and we don't care to inspire tra-

ditions of a dreadful place called Chlyntha which steals the inhabitants of other planets. If one of the places we've fished should ultimately learn to conquer outer space, they might find us and do some quite unpleasant things to us. . . .

"That is," she added with a deep sigh, "if there are any of us left by then."

When Iri sighed, it was quite easy to see that the Chlynthans were mammals. I wrenched my mind away.

"Well," I said, "it was very kind of you to give me all this useful information, but I doubt if you dropped in just to brief me. What's this leading up to? The date of my transformation into an exhibit at the Space Museum?"

There was no answer. Iri had got to her feet and was pacing up and down, deep in thought, between me and the open door. I don't like to sit while a lady is standing, so I got up too. To show I wasn't trying to escape—where to?—or intending to assault her, I went and leaned gracefully against the front bars.

I was a very disobliging zoo animal—I just wouldn't perform. They wanted to see me doing my strange antics—eating at a table, drinking out of a cup, sitting in a chair, even using the latrine in a side cubbyhole. The keepers had provided me with reasonable facsimiles of all these objects after

I'd drawn sketches of them. That was a week or so after I'd been thrown in the bare cage, when the first shock was over and I'd realized I might be in for a long term. I wondered how they provided proper gravity and air conditioning and food for all those "specimens" from nobody knows where; so far as I was concerned, Chlyntha was enough of an Earth-type planet to make no difference.

So leaning against the bars wasn't my usual daytime position; I was much more likely to be sitting with my back to the crowds. Sometimes they'd bang sticks on the bars to make me turn around, but the keepers discouraged that. I'd trained myself to attend to my natural needs of intake and outgo before the zoo opened or after it closed. I was comfortable enough, but the one thing I didn't have was privacy, except in the hours between the end of the evening session I spent doubling in brass as a laboratory animal, and the opening of the gates the next day. I'd had to grow a beard, though—they didn't trust me with a razor when I drew one, though they gave me a mirror and a comb and brought in a tub of bathwater early every morning.

Iri must have guessed some of my thoughts. A look of compassion fleeted across that lovely face.

"There may be ways we could make it easier for you here," she

said. "Tell me, and I'll try to get you anything you want."

"Why all the come-on? Are you trying to tell me that I'm valuable enough to be kept alive indefinitely? And if so, why?"

"I'm trying to find the words to explain so you'll understand. Have you noticed anything about my people that seems different from what you're used to in your own?"

"Well, of course you have what we call feathers—" I used the Terran word.

"You mean our plumage, instead of those bristles on you? I didn't mean that; I meant a difference in the—let's say in the differentiation of the sexes here."

"How would I know? You people have been all over me with a finetooth comb, but I've never seen any of you without those cloaks you all wear. Your men seem a bit taller and heavier than the women, and they have feathers on their chins—"

"That's not what I meant," she said sharply. "Our men are made just like you, and I suppose our women are made just like yours; it seems to be a common Galactic pattern for the dominant race."

"Then what?"

She paused again, and then went off on another tangent.

"I am the child of a High Person," she said abruptly. "It is an honor to mate with me."

I stared at her, my jaw drop-

ping. So that was what she was driving at! The one thing I hadn't expected was a proposition. The reflexes worked and I started toward her. She held up her hand.

"Just calm down, Duncan," she said calmly. "Impetuosity is a primitive trait."

I waited. There was hardly anything else I could do.

Safe from my primitive impetuosity, Iri sat down. She changed the subject again.

"What do you remember of your capture, Duncan?" she asked.

"Not much," I answered sulkily. "One minute I was in my ship, then something shining caught the edge of my sight. I turned my head, and the next thing I knew I was smothered in a net with a hook at the end of it. That's the last I remember till I woke up lying in this cage. And there wasn't so much as a cushion to lie on, that day," I concluded savagely.

There was another silence. Then Iri said: "I'm empowered to offer you a choice of two proposals, Duncan."

"You can go with one of our crews back where we got you, and guide them to a male and female of your species, of suitable age and other characteristics. If you do that, we'll drop you on your home planet. We'll take a chance of your talking—getting a couple of your promising sort would be worth the risk."

"Or?" I said. "I'm not a traitor."

"Or you can stay here, and your life will be spared. You will continue to be used as experimental material—this time on a practical basis."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you will mate with—with one of our women. The object will be to find out if our two breeds are mutually fertile. It's our last desperate chance to step up our population by introducing new blood before our people become too few to carry on our civilization."

A thought struck me.

"Did you volunteer for this—service? Or are you under orders?"

Moonlight doesn't reflect colors. But her warm apricot skin distinctly darkened.

"I'm under orders," she said. "I—I like you personally too, Duncan—that would be necessary. But I'm the nearest to the change of the women on our staff, yet I'm far enough away from it for there to be time to see if the experiment would work."

I looked at her skeptically. Women on Chlyntha must reach the menopause a lot earlier than ours do, or I was being kidded.

"Give me time to think," I said. "This isn't something I can decide in a hurry; my whole future's at stake. I take it that if I refuse either offer, I'll be—processed like the other 'specimens?'"

Iri nodded. "I'll give you till

tomorrow night," she said, turning toward the door. I was still standing where she'd frozen me. She lifted her hand again, palm up, and I unfroze. She went out, locking the door behind her.

I didn't sleep much that night. And the next day I had too much to think about to take the trouble to keep my back turned to my public or to make faces at them, as I had rather childishly been doing. I had only till evening to make up my mind, and I hadn't a useful idea. I stood apathetically at the bars, gazing out abstractedly at the crowd clustered before my cage. It must have been some kind of holiday—there were more of them than usual: the men with their feather beards, the women, the children.

All at once I got a flash. I thought I must be wrong, but when I made a point of it I found I was right. What Iri had been hinting at snapped into place, though I still couldn't see the whole picture.

All the women were young. And all the children were little girls.

I remembered another thing. Naturally the conversation around me at the evening research on Specimen Me was mostly confined to the subject at hand. But one night I heard the man I thought of as the Chief Doctor say to Iri, of some fascinating

X-ray plate of some portion of my anatomy: "I wish your parent could have lived to see this!" And Iri had answered: "Yes, it always predicted we'd find a specimen with an arrangement like that."

"Your parent," and "it."

Were the Chlynthans hermaphrodites?

No, plainly the men were men and the women were women. Then what? And where were the little boys? Where were the old men? But I hadn't time right then to puzzle things out. I had to figure out what I was going to do.

One thing I *wasn't* going to do, and that was to agree in good faith to help the Chlynthans kidnap either a Terran or Martian-colony couple the way I had been kidnaped.

But the alternative was to spend the remainder of my life on Chlyntha, to all effects a prisoner even if perhaps no longer a zoo exhibit, and an experimental stud for Iri and presumably for any other Chlynthan woman who wanted to try me out or could be coerced into taking me on. And I'd always liked to do my own picking.

What I needed was something to bargain from. Perhaps an offer, if the experiment should be successful, to go back as a missionary and recruit a batch of unattached Terrans, male and female, to help them bring their population back

to par? But there was no way, that I could make foolproof, to pretend such a scheme and then double-cross them, and I had no intention of doing any such thing in earnest.

I was so absorbed that I even let the crowd watch me eat my evening meal. One little devil got a nice long stick and poked me through the bars while I was eating, to see what I would do, and her mother—her parent?—only laughed instead of smacking her—it? I just went on eating.

Iri had said she was near the change. She might possibly be 25, though she didn't look a day over 20 of our years. The period of fertility of mammals is conditioned by their life expectancy. These weren't short-lived people; I once heard a white-feathered man in the crowd say to a woman: "You wouldn't remember that, child; it was all of 50 years ago, when I was young."

The synthetic but adequate food I was eating tasted vaguely, I thought in a corner of my mind, like fried oysters.

Oysters. I suddenly remembered the life-history of some species of oysters. Then I knew.

And I knew the only thing I could do that had even a possibility of success. I had about one chance in a thousand of putting it over. But nothing else I could think of had any chance at all.

I had thought my little confab with Iri would take place after the usual evening session of being punched and pinched and X-rayed and injected. But when they came for me I found the whole staff assembled in the consultation room, with the one I called the Chief Doctor installed at the head of the table. There were ten of them all told, two women besides Iri, and seven men. With my new perspective I noticed how young the girls were, and how far from young the men.

Nur, they called the Chief Doctor—I suppose, like Iri, it was a title rather than a name. He started in on me right away.

"I hear from Iri that you have learned to speak human language rather well, space creature," he began. . . . "Iri tells me also that our two proposals have been submitted to you. Have you decided which you will accept?"

I went right to it.

"Before deciding," I said, "I'd like first to get some things straight in my own mind.

"As I gather from what I've observed and from Iri's hints, your people are all born female. After a time, I don't know when, some kind of hormone change takes place and you are transformed into males. We have some creatures on my own planet which go through a similar cycle. We call them oysters."

"Are they the dominant race?"

one of the men wanted to know.

"Not exactly. But am I right?"

"Naturally," said Nur, looking at me like a teacher confronting a willing but particularly stupid pupil. "That is the normal development of a human being."

"On my planet that isn't the way human beings develop. We are born either male or female, about an equal number of each. And we stay whichever we are as long as we live."

I could feel a distinct tremor of shock going around the table, "Incredible!" murmured a woman; her head-feathers were quivering. "Obscene!" "Disgusting!" That was two of the men.

"We don't find it so. In fact, my people would feel the same way about you."

"But *we* are the normal ones," remarked Nur complacently. "Go on."

"The way I work it out, your women bear children just as ours do. Then after the change, they become completely masculine and can function as fathers instead of mothers."

"Of course. All the men here have been mothers, and now most of us are fathers."

"Then what's to prevent families getting all mixed up? I mean, women would be having children by—say the men who used to be their older sisters, or even their—"

"I won't stay to listen to this!" a woman exclaimed, jumping to

her feet. Even Iri looked horrified.

"Sit down, Raki," Nur said. "The space creature knows no better. It didn't mean to be offensive." He turned to me. "That," he stated, "is something that never has occurred and never could occur. People don't change their personalities because they change their sex; relatives keep up their old ties. I am the mother of two daughters and the father of one, and I can assure you that the fathers of my older children and the mother of my youngest child are all completely unrelated to me or to one another.

"In fact, the very mention of such a thing is an obscenity so dreadful that this is literally the first time those words have ever crossed my lips—and if you'll glance around you at the faces of my staff you'll realize they have never heard them openly expressed before."

"I see. I apologize if I have offended you; as you say, it is only my ignorance that is at fault. And here is another thing in which I shall doubtless display my ignorance again.

"Our two species being so fundamentally different, I doubt extremely whether they could be mutually fertile. You probably took it for granted that all mammals have your sexual history. But even supposing we could interbreed, what makes you think

that I, one single man, could restore the population-deficit of your whole planet?"

"We don't," said Nur calmly. "We have chosen Iri to make the experiment—we too have no idea whether it will succeed or not. You are merely the most promising of the creatures from every portion of the Galaxy we have captured during more than ten years of scouting. If the experiment does succeed, then naturally we shall invade and conquer your planet, and use its inhabitants as breeding animals."

Swell.

"Tell me," I said, "at what age can your females become mothers?"

"At about 15. And the change comes on about ten years later."

"That is a very short period—in my world it is about 30 years. Still, in ten years a woman ought to be able to bear four or five children. Why isn't that sufficient to keep your world populated and your civilization going?"

"You don't understand, space creature. The change doesn't come overnight; it is very slow. It takes over 20 years to be completed, and during most of our lives we are neither male nor female, but neuter, unable to either bear or beget offspring. And the period of male fertility also lasts only another ten years or so. That is why every woman during her fertile period must have as many

mates as possible; out of 30 or 40 men she may find only two or three who are able to give her a child. And if a man fails with one woman, logically it would be useless for him to try again with another. Our female phase seems to be definitely more fertile than our male phase."

Ah! That was what I had been devoutly hoping to hear. I had made a lucky guess. Here was my one chance in a thousand.

"Nur, ladies and gentlemen, including my charming proffered mate Iri," I said slowly and solemnly, "I can solve your problem. I can solve it without involving any more of my own kind. Among other things I have made a special investigation—" I hadn't, but let that pass—"of fertility and sterility. Our research on our planet—and there is no reason why it should not apply equally to yours—shows that 75 per cent of sterility is chargeable to the female partner.

"In other words, you have been managing the whole of your society the wrong way around. If you want more people here on Chlyntha, you must reverse the process. Each woman must have only one mate, but each man must become a father by many women. Why, we have examples in our history where one man has fathered 200 or more children by what we call his wives and concubines. There is your solution."

And what a Moslem Paradise *that* would be, I reflected privately—a wish-fulfilment dream of Don Juan! I could see looks of disagreement on the faces of the staff; of bewilderment, of antagonism—but also looks of dawning revelation. There was a long silence.

"You are proposing," said Nur finally, "you, a half-human being from an inferior culture, not even evolved enough to have developed Galactic travel, that we alter the whole social structure of Chlyntha, with its antiquity stretching back for untold thousands of years?"

"If you want to increase your population," I answered stubbornly.

Most of the faces were stony. Only Iri's had a light in it; I always knew Iri was the best of the bunch.

"Try it," I urged. "Try it for a year. Compare the births at the end of the year with those of the year before. If it doesn't work out the way I predict it will, then I'll agree to the experiment you wanted. And if that doesn't succeed, you'll kill me and stuff me and put me in your museum—and you'll have lost nothing.

"Under no circumstances, I may add, would I ever have agreed to your alternative proposal, to put the finger on others of my own kind. That's out."

I kept my eyes on Nur. He

was the leader. Whatever conclusion he came to, the others would follow. And whatever conclusion they came to, their whole world would follow—it was clearly one monolithic totalitarian state.

At last Nur smoothed back the white feathers of his head and looked me coolly in the eye.

"And if by some lucky guess you are right, space creature," he said, "what do you expect in return?"

"Only to be taken home again and left there."

"But if we do that, what guarantee have we that you will not reveal our location and arouse your fellow-beings to take vengeance against us?"

"You know I couldn't do that—we have no starships. And further, you could keep me under sedation all the way and deliver me unconscious. That way I couldn't possibly find out your co-ordinates."

"We might still be discovered ultimately by trial and error."

"In my world," I said, "We have a profound taboo. It is, among decent people—of whom I hope you have decided I am one—never to break a promise made on one's sacred honor. I so pledge you that I will keep this whole story secret forever."

Nur looked at me meditatively.

"Very interesting," he said at last. "Take it back, Iri, and then

return here. We must discuss this for a long time."

My heart began to beat again, but I felt pretty weak. They hadn't said no. And if they said yes, even if my theory proved wrong, at least I'd have had a year's reprieve to think out another plan.

For a week I was left alone in my cage. The evening sessions had ended. Instead of the regular keepers, it was Iri who brought me my meals and cleaned up after me. She was as pretty as ever, but she didn't need to freeze me to keep me off. I'd lost my appetite for Chlynthan girls now that I'd become aware of their future.

I knew I had put it over, the day Nur himself directed my removal from the cage. I was taken to a comfortable room, furnished according to the sketches I had made for them when they first settled me in my quarters in the zoo. I couldn't read their tape-books, and they seemed to have nothing to correspond to our Tridimens shows, but I kept myself busy.

I began this account about six months ago. I didn't dare ask for writing materials, but I found the absorbent plastic they use for towels makes a pretty good paper; by using it sparingly for both purposes (it's flushed away after use), I never required more than

a normal amount. They have no typewriters, but I learned as a hobby in boyhood how to write by hand, and as a writing medium I used a fallen feather from the crest of one of my own attendants, dipped in a coffee-like drink they gave me every morning, and which I poured into my extra cup—I pretended one day that I'd broken mine and thrown it down the disposal chute—which I kept secreted. I am rather proud of my ingenuity; it reminds me of an ancient book I once saw televised, called "Robinson Crusoe."

There was a window in my room, and I could look down from it. I was still in the zoo grounds—I could see the crowds of visitors, but they could no longer see me. It seemed to me I could see more groups of one man and several women, and fewer of one woman and several men.

I have wondered what emotional upheavals, what psychological crisis, must be stirring those beings whose age-long way of life was being forcibly reversed. What an opportunity for an anthropologist, as well as for a sociologist or a psychologist!

Iri had apparently gone back to being the Iri, whatever that was, of the laboratory staff. I didn't see her again. I missed her; I wondered if she missed me: she had been the nearest approach to a personal friend I had known on Chlyntha. The people who fed

me and housekept for me were strangers. The door of my room was always kept locked, of course; I was still a prisoner. But outside my window was a balcony, where I could exercise and get fresh air and sunshine. The time went faster than I had anticipated—too fast, if my informed guess should prove wrong.

It was their summer when I was taken from the cage, and now it is summer again. Yesterday was the pay-off. I had a sudden visit from Nur. I barely had time to turn the written sheets over to look like towels, and to put my cup and feather under my pillow. The keepers came at regular times, so I'd grown a bit careless.

"Space creature," Nur said gravely, "you are very fortunate.

"I don't know by what lucky fluke you settled on the solution of a problem that had baffled our best minds for so long. You are very popular with our men," he commented, with the first smile I had ever seen on his face, "but not quite so popular with some of the women, including your friend Iri. However, they can console themselves with the prospect of getting their own back later."

"You mean—" I said breathlessly.

"The statistics have been compiled. The number of births on Chlyntha is almost twice as great in the past year as in the year before."

I was dizzy with relief.

"And now—" my voice was unsteady—"when will you take me home?"

"The helicopter will come for you tomorrow. It will take you to our laboratory, which I'm sure you remember, and we'll administer your sedation there, so you'll be unconscious when you're transferred. That is the best way to manage your journey, don't you think?"

"Whatever you say," I answered. I was too excited to care about details. . . .

That tomorrow is today. I woke up very early for my last day on Chlyntha. Soon through my window I shall see the helicopter that is to take me to the laboratory, and then to the starship. With counter-gravity, no matter how many parsecs away from Sol I am, it can only be a few months before they land me on Mars or Terra, it doesn't matter which.

All that remains is to get rid of this manuscript before they come for me. I hate to do it—it has been the comfort and companion of my imprisonment—but of course I couldn't take it with me: that or anything else except the clothes I came in, which I suppose they have kept.

I wonder how long I have been away, in terms of our own time. Will the babies I left on Earth be old people now? Will it be safe ever to tell my story? Will

they believe it if I do? How far, actually, am I bound by my pledged word to alien beings who kidnaped me and kept me captive?

Well, all that I can make my mind up about when I'm back again. And even if I have to remake my whole life and rebuild all my associations, I shall have come home!

"And now," said the museum guide in an impersonal monotone, "in this glassed case you see, just as it was in life, the most nearly humanoid creature from outer space in the entire collection.

"It was almost as intelligent as a real human being. In fact, it was even able, by a lucky guess, to be of some service to us, its superiors. But, like all non-human creatures, it was also stupid.

"In return for its service, it asked for replanetation, and it actually seems to have believed it would receive it. The Nur of that time, a Chlynthan noted for its single-minded devotion to our glorious world, has recorded that itself felt some compunction at having to 'break faith' with so remarkably humanoid a space creature; but of course, as the Nur remarked, the first and highest virtue is loyalty to one's own planet.

"The sheets of plastic lying be-

neath the creature's hand, written on in an indecipherable language, were in its possession when the museum helicopter pilot, approaching the window to pick the space creature up, arrested it by

the freezing gesture. By the Nur's order, this diary or apologia or whatever it may be was preserved when the creature was prepared for the museum after a painless death at the Disposery. . . ."

In the next issue of Venture S F . . .

Probable entries in our next issue, not yet finally made up, include:

—Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s "Sit Close to Me, Sam," which we had tentatively promised for *this* issue. We apologize for the delay, but think you'll find the story worth having waited for. . . .

—"The Enemy," by Damon Knight, which tells of a girl alone on a frontier asteroid—at least she *thought* she was alone. . . .

—plus a tight, hard little tale by Algis Budrys; a strange, unsettling account of the crew of a spaceship in trouble by Doug Morrissey; a lighthearted report of the adventures of a space-hopping con man by James E. Gunn; and others.

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I'M IN MARSPORT WITHOUT HILDA

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Drifting through low gravity in a sea of jasmine

perfume with Flora—my plan for the evening. . . .

Breaking up a trillion-dollar drug-menace deal—

the Service's plan for my evening. . . .

Said in Spaceoline: To hell with Service is lovely.

IT WORKED ITSELF OUT, TO begin with, like a dream. I didn't have to make any arrangements. I didn't have to touch it. I just watched things work out. . . . Maybe right then's when I should have smelled catastrophe.

It began with my usual month's layoff between assignments. A month on and a month off is the right and proper routine for the Galactic Service. I reached Marsport for the usual three-day layover before the short hop to Earth.

Ordinarily, Hilda, God bless her, as sweet a wife as any man ever had, would be there waiting for me and we'd have a nice sedate time of it—a nice little interlude for the two of us. The only trouble with that is that Marsport is the rowdiest hellhole in the system, and a nice little interlude isn't exactly what fits in.

Only, how do I explain that to Hilda, hey?

Well, *this* time, my mother-in-law, God *bless* her (for a change) got sick just two days before I reached Marsport; and the night before landing, I got a spacegram from Hilda saying she would stay on Earth with her mother and wouldn't meet me this one time.

I 'grammed back my loving regrets and my feverish anxiety concerning her mother; and when I landed, there I was—

I was in Marsport without Hilda!

That was still nothing, you understand. It was the frame of the picture, the bones of the woman. Now there was the matter of the lines and coloring inside the frame; the skin and flesh outside the bones.

So I called up Flora (Flora of certain rare episodes in the past)

and for the purpose I used a video booth. . . . Damn the expense; full speed ahead.

I was giving myself ten to one odds she'd be out, she'd be busy with her videophone disconnected, she'd be dead, even.

But she was in, with her videophone connected—and she was anything but dead.

She looked better than ever. Age cannot wither nor custom stale, as somebody or other once said, her infinite variety. And the robe she wore (or, rather, almost didn't wear) helped a lot.

Was she glad to see me? She squealed, "Max! It's been years."

"I know, Flora, but this is it, if you're available. Because guess what! I'm in Marsport without Hilda."

She squealed again. "Isn't that *nice!* Then come on over."

I goggled a bit. This was too much. "You mean you *are* available?" You have to understand that Flora was never available without plenty of notice. Well, she was that kind of knockout.

She said, "Oh, I've got some quibbling little arrangement, Max, but I'll take care of that. You come on over."

"I'll come," I said happily.

Flora was the kind of girl—Well, I tell you, she had her rooms under Martian gravity, 0.4 Earth-normal. The gadget to free her of Marsport's pseudo-grav field was expensive of course, but I'll

tell you just in passing that it was worth it, and she had no trouble paying it off. If you've ever held a girl in your arms at 0.4 gee's, you need no explanation. If you haven't, explanations will do no good. I'm also sorry for you.

Talk about floating on clouds

. . .

And mind you, the girl has to know how to handle low-gravity. Flora did. I won't talk about myself, you understand, but Flora didn't howl for me to come over and start breaking previous engagements just because she was at loose ends. Her ends were never loose.

I closed connections, and only the prospect of seeing it all in the flesh (such flesh!) could have made me wipe out the image with such alacrity. I stepped out of the booth.

And at that point, that precise point, that very split-instant of time, the first whiff of catastrophe nudged itself up to me.

That first whiff was the bald head of that lousy Rog Crinton of the Mars offices, gleaming over a headfull of pale blue eyes, pale yellow complexion and pale brown mustache. He was the same Rog Crinton, with some Slavic strain in his ancestry, that half the people out on field work thought had a middle name that went sunnuvabich.

I didn't bother getting on all fours and beating my forehead

against the ground because my vacation had started the minute I had gotten off the ship.

I said with only normal politeness, "What the hell do you want and I'm in a hurry. I've got an appointment."

He said, "You've got an appointment with me. I've got a little job for you."

I laughed and told him in all necessary anatomical detail where he could put the little job, and offered to get him a mallet to help. I said, "It's my month off, friend."

He said, "Red emergency alert, friend."

Which meant, no vacation, just like that. I couldn't believe it. I said, "Nuts, Rog. Have a heart. I got an emergency alert of my own."

"Nothing like this."

"Rog," I pleaded, "can't you get someone else? Anyone else?"

"You're the only Class A agent on Mars."

"Send to Earth, then. They stack agents like micro-pile units at Headquarters."

"This has got to be done before 11 P.M. What's the matter? You haven't got three hours?"

I grabbed my head. The boy just didn't *know*. I said, "Let me make a call, will you?"

I stepped back in the booth, glared at him and said, "Private!"

Flora shone on the screen again, like a mirage on an aster-

oid. She said, "Something wrong, Max? Don't say something's wrong. I cancelled my other engagement."

I said, "Flora, baby, I'll be there. I'll *be* there. But something's come up."

She asked the natural question in a hurt tone of voice and I said, "No. Not another girl. With you in the same town they don't make any other girls. Females, maybe. Not girls. Baby! Honey! It's business. Just hold on. It won't take long."

She said, "All right," but she said it kind of like it was just enough *not* all right so that I got the shivers.

I stepped out of the booth and said, "All right, Rog Sunnuvabich, what kind of mess have you cooked up for me?"

We went into the space-port bar and got us an insulated booth. He said, "The *Antares Giant* is coming in from Sirius in exactly half an hour; at 8 P.M. local time."

"Okay."

"Three men will get out, among others, and will wait for the *Space Eater* coming in from Earth at 11 P.M. and leaving for Capella some time thereafter. The three men will get on the *Space Eater* and will then be out of our jurisdiction."

"So."

"So between 8 and 11, they

will be in a special waiting-room and you will be with them. I have a trimensional image of each for you so you'll know who they are and which is which. You have between 8 and 11 to decide which one is carrying contraband."

"What kind of contraband?"

"The worst kind. Altered Spaceoline."

"Altered Spaceoline?"

He had thrown me. I knew what Spaceoline was. If you've been on a space-hop you know, too. And in case you're Earth-bound yourself the bare fact is that everyone needs it on the first space-trip; almost everybody needs it for the first dozen trips; lots need it every trip. Without it, there is vertigo associated with free fall, screaming terrors, semi-permanent psychoses. With it, there is nothing; you don't mind a thing. And it isn't habit-forming; it has no adverse side-effects. Spaceoline is ideal, essential, unsubstitutable. When in doubt, take Spaceoline.

Rog said, "That's right, altered Spaceoline. It can be changed chemically, by a simple reaction that can be conducted in anyone's basement, into a drug that will give one giant-size charge and become your baby-blue habit the first time. It is on a par with the most dangerous alkaloids we know."

"And we just found out about it?"

"No. The Service has known about it for years, and we've kept others from knowing by squashing every discovery flat. Now, however, the discovery has gone too far."

"In what way?"

"One of the men who will be stopping over at this spaceport is carrying some of the altered Spaceoline on his person. Chemists in the Capellan system, which is outside the Federation, will analyze it and set up ways of synthesizing more. After that, it's either fight the worst drug menace we've ever seen or suppress the matter by suppressing the source."

"You mean Spaceoline."

"Right. And if we suppress Spaceoline, we suppress spacetravel."

I decided to put my finger on the point. "Which one of the three has it?"

Rog smiled nastily, "If we knew, would we need you? You're to find out which of the three."

"You're calling on me for a lousy frisk job?"

"Touch the wrong one at the risk of a haircut down to the larynx. Every one of the three is a big man on his own planet. One is Edward Harponaster; one is Joaquin Lipsky; and one is Andiamo Ferrucci. Well?"

He was right. I'd heard of every one of them. Chances are you have, too; *important*, very important people and not one was

touchable without proof in advance. I said, "Would one of them touch a dirty deal like . . ."

"There are trillions involved," said Rog, "which means any one of the three would. And one of them is, because Jack Hawk got that far before he was killed. . . ."

"Jack Hawk's dead?"

"Right and one of those guys arranged the killing. Now you find out which. You put the finger on the right one before 11 and there's a promotion, a raise in pay, a pay-back for poor Jack Hawk, and a rescue of the Galaxy. You put the finger on the wrong one and there'll be a nasty interstellar situation and you'll be out on your ear and also on every black-list from here to Antares and back."

I said, "Suppose I don't finger anybody."

"That would be like fingering the wrong one as far as the Service is concerned."

"I've got to finger someone but only the right one or my head's handed to me."

"In thin slices. You're beginning to understand me, Max."

In a long lifetime of looking ugly, Rog Crinton had never looked uglier. The only comfort I got out of staring at him was the realization that he was married, too, and that he lived with his wife at Marsport all year

round. And does he deserve that! Maybe I'm hard on him, but he *deserves* it.

I put in a quick call to Flora, as soon as Rog was out of sight.

She said, "Well?" The magnetic seams on her robe were opened just right and her voice sounded as thrillingly soft as she looked.

I said, "Baby, honey, it's something I can't talk about, but I've got to do it, see? Now you hang on, I'll get it over with if I have to swim the Grand Canal to the ice-cap in my underwear, see? If I have to claw Phobos out of the sky. If I have to cut myself in pieces and mail myself parcel post."

"Gee," she said, "If I thought I was going to have to wait . . ."

I winced. She just wasn't the type to respond to poetry. Actually, she was a simple creature of action. . . . But after all, if I were going to be drifting through low-gravity in a sea of jasmine perfume with Flora, poetry-response is not the type of qualification I would consider most indispensable.

I said, urgently, "Just hold on, Flora. I won't be any time at all. I'll make it up to you."

I was annoyed, sure, but I wasn't worried as yet. Rog hadn't more than left me when I figured out exactly how I was going to tell the guilty man from the others.

It was easy. I should have called Rog back and told him, but there's no law against wanting egg in your beer and oxygen in your air. It would take me five minutes and then off I would go to Flora; a little late, maybe, but with a promotion, a raise and a slobbering kiss from the Service on each cheek.

You see, it's like this. Big industrialists don't go space-hopping much; they use trans-video reception. When they do go to some ultra-high interstellar conference, as these three were probably going, they took Spaceoline. For one thing, they didn't have enough hops under their belt to risk doing without. For another, Spaceoline was the expensive way of doing it and industrialists did things the expensive way. I know their psychology.

Now that would hold for two of them. The one who carried contraband, however, couldn't risk Spaceoline—even at the price of risking space-sickness. Under Spaceoline influence, he could throw the drug away; or give it away; or talk gibberish about it. He would *have* to stay in control of himself.

It was as simple as that.

The *Antares Giant* was on time. They brought in Lipsky first. He had thick, ruddy lips, rounded jowls, very dark eyebrows and hair just beginning to show gray. He just looked at me and sat down.

Nothing. He was under Spaceoline.

I said, "Good evening, sir."

He said, in a dreamy voice, "Surrealismus of Panamy hearts in three-quarter time for a cup of coffeedom of speech."

That was Spaceoline all the way. The buttons in the human mind were set free-swinging. Each syllable suggests the next in free association.

Andiamo Ferrucci came in next. Black mustache, long and waxed, olive complexion, pock-marked face. He sat down.

I said, "Nice trip?"

He said, "Trip the light fantastic tock the clock is crowings on the bird."

Lipsky said, "Bird to the wise guyed book to all places everybody."

I grinned. That left Harponaster. I had my needle gun neatly palmed and out of sight and the magnetic coil ready to grip him.

And then Harponaster came in. He was thin, leathery, and, though near-bald, considerably younger than he seemed in his trimensional image. And he was Spaceolined to the gills.

I said, "Damn!"

Harponaster said, "Damyantee note speech to his last time I saw wood you say so."

Ferrucci said, "Sow the seed the territory under dispute do well to come along long road to-nightingale."

Lipsky said, "Gay lords hopping pong balls."

I stared from one to the other as the nonsense ran down in shorter and shorter spurts—and then silence.

I got the picture, all right. One of them was faking. He had thought ahead and realized that omitting the Spaceoline would be a giveaway. He might have bribed an official into injecting saline or dodged it some other way.

One of them was faking. It wasn't hard to fake the thing. Comedians on sub-etheric had a Spaceoline skit regularly. It was amazing the liberties they could take with the moral code in that way. You've heard them.

I stared at them and got the first prickle at the base of my skull that said: What if you *don't* finger the right one?

It was 8:30 and there was my job, my reputation, my head growing rickety upon my neck to be considered. I saved it all for later and thought of Flora. She wasn't going to wait for me forever. For that matter, chances were she wouldn't wait for half an hour.

I wondered. Could the faker keep up free-association if nudged gently onto dangerous territory?

I said, "The floor's covered with a nice solid rug" and ran the last two words together to make it "solidrug."

Lipsky: "Drug from underneath

the dough re mi fa sol to be saved."

Ferrucci said, "Saved and a haircut above the common herd something about younicorny as Kansas high as my knee."

Harponaster said, "Kneether wind nor snow use trying to by four ever and effervescence and sensibilityter totter."

Lipsky said, "Totters and rags."

Ferrucci said, "Agsactly."

Harponaster said, "Actlymation."

A few grunts and they ran down.

I tried again and I didn't forget to be careful. They would remember everything I said afterward and what I said had to be harmless. I said, "This is a darned good space-line."

Ferrucci said, "Lines and tigers and elephanthills on the prairie dogs do bark of the boughwough . . ."

I interrupted, looking at Harponaster, "A darned good space-line."

"Line the bed and rest a little black sheepishion of wrong way to ring the eloths of a perfect day."

I interrupted again, glaring at Lipsky, "Good space-line."

"Liron is hot-chacolit ain't gonna be the same on you vee and double the stakes and potato and heel."

Someone else said, "Heel the sicknecessaryd and write will wincetance."

"Tance with mealtime."

"I'm comingle."

"Inglish."

"Ishter seals."

"Eels."

I tried a few more times and got nowhere. The faker, whichever he was, had practiced or had natural talents at talking free association. He was disconnecting his brain and letting the words come out any old way. And he must be inspired by knowing exactly what I was after. If "drug" hadn't given it away, "space-line" three times repeated must have. I was safe with the other two, but *he* would know.

—And he was having fun with me. All three were saying phrases that might have pointed to a deep inner guilt ("sol to be saved" "little black sheepishion of wrong" "drug from underneath" and so on). Two were saying such things helplessly, randomly. The third was amusing himself.

So how did I find the third? I was in a feverish thrill of hatred against him and my fingers twitched. The bastard was subverting the Galaxy. More than that, he was keeping me from Flora.

I could go up to each of them and start searching. The two who were really under Spaccoline would make no move to stop me. They could feel no emotion, no fear, no anxiety, no hate, no passion, no desire for self-defense.

And if one made the slightest gesture of resistance I would have my man.

But the innocent ones would remember afterward.

I sighed. If I tried it, I would get the criminal all right but later I would be the nearest thing to chopped liver any man had ever been. There would be a shakeup in the Service, a big stink the width of the Galaxy, and in the excitement and disorganization, the secret of altered Spaceoline would get out anyway and so what the hell.

Of course, the one I wanted might be the first one I touched. One chance out of three. I'd have one out and only God can make a three.

Damn it, something had started them going while I was muttering to myself and Spaceoline is contagious a gigolo my, oh—

I stared desperately at my watch and my line of sight focussed on 9:15.

Where the devil was the time going to?

Oh, my; oh, nuts; oh, Flora!

I had no choice. I made my way to the booth for another quick call to Flora. Just a quick one, you understand, to keep things alive; assuming they weren't dead already.

I kept saying to myself: She won't answer.

I tried to prepare myself for

that. There were other girls, there were other—

Hell, there were no other girls.

If Hilda had been in Marsport, I would never had had Flora on my mind in the first place and it wouldn't have mattered. But I was in Marsport *without* Hilda and I had made a date with Flora; Flora and a body that had been made up out of heaping handfuls of all that was soft and fragrant and firm; Flora and a low-gravity room and a way about her that made it seem like free fall through a warm, breathable ocean of champagne-flavored meringue—

The signal was signalling and signalling and I didn't dare break off.

Answer! Answer!

She answered. She said, "It's you!"

"Of course, sweetheart, who else would it be?"

"Lots of people. Someone who would *come*."

"There's just this little detail of business, honey."

"What business? Plastons for who?"

I almost corrected her grammar but I was wondering what this plastons kick was.

Then I remembered. I told her once I was a plaston salesman. That was the time I brought her a plaston nightgown that was a honcy. Just thinking of it made me ache where I needed no more ache.

I said, "Look. Just give me another half-hour—"

Her eyes grew moist. "I'm sitting here all by myself."

"I'll make it up to you." To show you how desperate I was getting, I was definitely beginning to think along paths that could lead only to jewelry even though a sizable dent in the bankbook would show up to Hilda's piercing eye like the Horsehead Nebula interrupting the Milky Way.

She said, "I had a perfectly good date and I broke it off."

I protested, "You said it was a quibbling little arrangement."

That was a mistake. I knew it the minute I said it.

She shrieked, "*Quibbling little arrangement!*" (It was what she had said. But having the truth on your side just makes it worse in arguing with a woman. Don't I know?) "You call a man who's promised me an estate on Earth—"

She went on and on about that estate on Earth. There wasn't a gal in Marsport who wasn't wangling for an estate on Earth and you could count the number who got one on the sixth finger of either hand. But hope springs eternal in the human breast, and Flora had plenty of room for it to spring in.

I tried to stop her. I threw in honeys and babies until you would have thought that every bee on the planet Earth was pregnant.

No use.

She finally said, "And here I am all alone, with *nobody*, and what do you think *that* will do to my reputation?" and broke off contact.

Well, she was right. I felt like the lowest heel in the Galaxy. If the word did get around that she had been stood up, the word would also get around that she was stand-uppable, that she was losing the old touch. A thing like that can ruin a girl.

I went back into the reception room. A flunky outside the door saluted me in.

I stared at the three industrialists and speculated on the order in which I would slowly choke each to death if I could but receive choking orders. Harponaster first, maybe. He had a thin, stringy neck that the fingers could go round neatly and a sharp Adams apple against which the thumbs could find purchase.

It cheered me up infinitesimally, to the point where I muttered, "Boy!" just out of sheer longing.

It started them off at once. Ferrucci said, "Boyl the watern the spout you go in the snow to sneeze—"

Harponaster of the scrawny neck added, "Nies and nephew don't like orporalley cat."

Lipsky said, "Cattle for ship-mentering the home stretchings are good bait and drank drunk."

"Drunkle aunterior passagewayt a while."

"While beasts oh pray."

"Rayls to Chicago."

"Go way."

"Waiter."

"Terble."

"Ble."

Then nothing.

They stared at me. I stared at them. They were empty of emotion (or two were) and I was empty of ideas. And time passed.

I stared at them some more and thought about Flora. It occurred to me that I had nothing to lose that I had not already lost. I might as well talk about her.

I said, "Gentlemen, there is a girl in this town whose name I will not mention for fear of compromising her. Let me describe her to you, gentlemen."

And I did. If I say so myself, the last two hours had honed me to such a fine force-field edge that the description of Flora took on a kind of poetry that seemed to be coming from some well-spring of masculine force deep in the sub-basement of my unconscious.

And they sat frozen, almost as though they were listening, and hardly ever interrupting. People under Spaceoline have a kind of politeness about them. They won't speak when someone else is speaking. That's why they take turns.

Occasionally, of course, I paused a bit because the poignancy of the subject matter made

me want to linger and then one of them might put in a few words before I could gather myself together and continue.

"Pinkie of champagnes and aches and bittern of the century box."

"Round that and/or this sandy beaches."

"Assault and peppert girlieping leopard."

I drowned them out and kept talking. "This young lady, gentlemen," I said, "has an apartment fitted out for low gravity. Now you might ask of what use is low gravity? I intend to tell you, gentlemen, for if you have never had occasion to spend a quiet evening with a Marsport prima donna in privacy, you cannot imagine—"

But I tried to make it unnecessary for them to imagine—the way I told it they were *there*. They would remember all this afterward but I doubted mightily that either of the two innocents would object to it in hindsight. Chances were they would look me up to ask a phone number.

I kept it up, with loving, careful detail and a kind of heartfelt sadness in my voice, until the loudspeaker announced the arrival of the *Space Eater*.

That was that. I said in a loud voice, "Rise, gentlemen."

They got up in unison, faced the door, started walking, and as Ferrucci passed me, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Not

you, you murdering louse," and my magnetic coil was on his wrist before he could breathe twice.

Ferrucci fought like a demon. He was under no Spaceoline influence. They found the altered Spaceoline in thin flesh-colored plastic pads hugging the inner surface of his thighs, with hairs affixed to it in the normal pattern. You couldn't see it at all; you could only feel it, and even then it took a knife to make sure.

Afterward, Rog Crinton, grinning and half-insane with relief, held me by the lapel with a death-grip. "How did you do it? What gave it away?"

I said, trying to pull loose, "One of them was faking a Spaceoline jag. I was sure of it. So I told them," (I grew cautious—none of the bum's business as to the details, you know) "—uh, ribald stories, see, and two of them never reacted, so they were Spaceolined. But Ferrucci's breathing speeded up and the beads of sweat came out on his forehead. I gave a pretty dramatic rendition, and he reacted, so he was under no Spaceoline. And when they all stood up to head out for the ship, I was sure of my man and stopped him. Now will you let me go?"

He let go and I almost fell over backward.

I was set to take off. My feet were pawing at the ground with-

out any instructions for me—but I turned back.

"Hey, Rog," I said, "can you sign me a chit for a thousand credits without its going on the record—for services rendered to the Service."

That's when I realized he was half-insane with relief and very temporary gratitude, because he said, "Sure, Max, sure. Ten thousand credits if you want it."

"I want," I said. "I want. I want."

He filled out an official Service chit for ten thousand credits; good as cash anywhere in half the Galaxy. He was actually grinning as he gave it to me and you can bet I was grinning as I took it.

How *he* intended accounting for it was his affair; the point was that I wouldn't have to account for it to Hilda.

I stood in the booth, one last time, signalling Flora. I didn't dare let matters go till I reached her place. The additional half-hour might just give her time to get someone else, if she hadn't already.

Make her answer. Make her answer. Make her—

She answered, but she was in formal clothes. She was going out and I had obviously caught her by two minutes.

"I am going out," she announced. "Some men can be decent. And I do not wish to see

you in the henceforward. I do not wish ever to find my eyes upon you. You will do me a great favor, Mister Whoeveryouare, if you will unhand my signal combination and never pollute it with—"

I wasn't saying anything. I was just standing there holding my breath and also holding the chit up where she could see it. Just standing there. Just holding.

Sure enough, at the word "pollute" she came in for a closer look. She wasn't much on education, that girl, but she could read "ten thousand credits" faster than any college graduate in the Solar System.

She said, "Max! For me?"

"All for you, baby," I said, "I told you I had a little business to do. I wanted to surprise you."

"Oh, Max, that's sweet of you. I didn't really mind. I was joking. Now you come right here to me." She took off her coat, which with Flora is a *very* interesting action to watch.

"What about your date?" I said.

"I said I was joking," she said. She dropped her coat gently to the floor, and toyed with a brooch that seemed to hold together what there was of her dress.

"I'm coming," I said, faintly.

"With every single one of those credits now," she said roguishly.

"With every single one," I said.

I broke contact, stepped out of the booth and now, finally, I was set . . . really set—

I heard my name called.
"Max! Max!" Someone was running toward me. "Rog Crinton said I would find you here. Mama's all right after all, so I got special passage on the *Space Eater* and what's this about ten thousand credits?"

I didn't turn. I said, "Hello, Hilda."

I stood rock steady.

And then I turned and did the hardest thing I ever succeeded in doing in all my goddam, good-for-nothing, space-hopping life.

I smiled.

NOTE . . .

If you enjoy VENTURE Science Fiction, you will enjoy some of the other Mercury Publications:

- **FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION**—*Top-flight science fiction by the field's most outstanding authors. The October issue, now on sale, features a novelet by Jane Roberts, "The Chestnut Beads," together with a new story by Fritz Leiber, Richard Matheson, and others. . . .*
- **MERCURY MYSTERY BOOK-MAGAZINE**—*The issue now on sale leads off with a new novel by William Campbell Gault—"Don't Call Tonight"—featuring detective Joe Puma, who is involved with some strange and deadly Californians, and a pretty girl who isn't all bad. Plus pieces by Edward D. Radin, Samuel W. Taylor, Edgar Lustgarten, and others.*
- **ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE**—*The world's finest mysteries every month by the world's foremost writers. The October issue features a variety of first-rate stories by Agatha Christie, Nelson Algren, Francis & Richard Lockridge, William O'Farrell, and others.*
- **JONATHAN PRESS MYSTERY**—"Murder Is Insane," by Glenn B. Barns . . . *the tense tale of murder on the grounds of a mental institution. Not random murder—though the killer, whoever he was, might be insane. Maniac or not, he knew enough not to be caught in the act, and how to kill again. . . .*

ON HAND: A Book

by THEODORE STURGEON



COME reminisce . . .

When Sturgeon was a cotton-headed, be-knickered and bewildered stripling of a dozen summers, an unlikely sequence was climaxed when Kismet cuffed him into the corridors of a monstrous education-factory in an alien city. So lost was he in such an environment that though he attended all his classes, he was marked absent for an entire semester because he had never heard of a "home room" and therefore never went there. Among the knotted memories of that tangled time is the face and form of a youth named Sheppard, who had the appearance of a dromedary and the soul of a shark. He was after money and he got it, too. The nickel-for-milk which was all the wide-eyed twelve-year-old brought to school each day was Sheppard's challenge and Sheppard's goal. He carried a pocket full of wonders and talked a blistering blue streak. He had a punch-board and a hand-colored genuine threepenny black cut right out of Scott's catalog, stink-bombs, little glass vials of metallic sodium labelled *Spitfire* and guaranteed to burst into flame when moistened ("I forgot to tell you, you 'sposed to spit on the floor first," he counselled the weeping customer on the way to the school dispensary, "not stiek it in your mouth,") and real ticket stubs from last year's Penn-Navy game. He was once seen to sell a flattened and totally rusted tin can (not to anyone you know) with the story that he had stolen it from his mother, who had treasured it for forty-three years in the course of an experiment to see how long it would take to disappear altogether. All Sheppard had to know was what you were interested in, and he'd get it and sell it to you. He even took a young general science teacher for a quarter for a neat package of plant food which had been wholesaled to him by a passing horse.

Came the day when Sturgeon unguardedly reported to this enterprising lad his recent exposure to *The Time Machine*, by H. G. Wells, and a treasured tattered tome containing both *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Round the Moon* by Jules Verne. Sheppard na-

turally happened to have with him something much better . . . and you know, he had? Think of it, chillun: for months thereafter he was cheating your correspondent by selling him mint back copies of '31 and '32 *Amazings* and *Astoundings* and *Weirds* for 7¢ each.

Now either there is no need to describe to you Venturers the impact of such an exposure, or there are no words for it. The years went by and the magazines shed their leaves and enriched the humus of yesteryear, and plots, titles, and authors' names merged and sank and joined the waiting, fallow earth of the forgotten, with only a jut here and a sparkle there sturdy enough to defy erosion.

One such weatherproof fragment was a saga, author unknown, title unremembered, concerning four adventurers whose names were Wade, Morey, Fuller and Something-or-other, and their space-ship encased in some infinitely dense transparent metal called *lux* and lined with some infinitely reflective matter called *relux*. There was a most logical explanation of second-order, or subspace travel, and an ingenious snivvy which seemed to use cataclysmic energy by storing it up. And then there was a series of montages: Wade in his anti-gravity space suit offering to lift a friendly alien across to his ship, and when the man took hold of Wade's ankles and stepped outside, the weight that came on Wade's resources like to bust the hinge-pins outen his pelvis, because the stranger's bones were made of iron. Then there was something about the ship's capture by the gravitic field of an immense cold star, and their escape by latching on to a passing sun and hurling it at the dead giant. Along with these scattered shards was a *feeling*—a matrix composed not only of the horizonless reach of these unconquerable adventurers, but of the entire taste of the end of childhood and the expansion of sense and the senses. The real world was becoming vivid and improbable in those days, and the improbable became correspondingly vivid as it detached itself from reality. And while the real world hunted out and wounded the sense-of-wonder as the killable quantity in children and fools, the old early science fiction gave it a haven and did not despise its awe. The details of the stories were largely forgotten because they could well be; they were not real things and did not tempt belief and consciousness away from real things. But with the matrix in which the fragments lay buried, was preserved the sense-of-wonder instead of letting it die, which was an enrichment and incurred a debt: "Some day I'll find out who wrote that Wade-Morey-Fuller thing and thank him."

In the late forties it occurred to Sturgeon to ask John Campbell, who knows everything, if he knew this too. He did. *He* wrote it. Some-

thing-or-other's name was Arcot, and the serials were *Piracy Preferred*, *Solarite*, *The Black Star Passes* . . . ("novelized" and published by Fantasy Press in 1953) and your book *On Hand: Islands in Space* (Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa.; 224 pp; \$2.50.)

This is a real lousy book. There is no characterization (for instance, nobody in the crew dumb enough to need the explanations of superphenomena which they keep telling each other), no suspense (because of the heroes' invincibility) and no plot in the broad sense of reader-participation. And the style is such as would dry up the purple blood of the sleaziest fan magazine.

BUT—

These are mid-century judgments applied to something created circa 1930. Let's back off and examine this work for its intrinsic worth, and forget for a moment those virtuositities which were not—probably could not be—applied to the field when this was written.

First of all, this is a Story—not an integrated and developing plot, but a Voyage far afield and a catalogue of the marvels of other-where. Second, it is a cornucopia of technological and mechanistic matter, both real and extrapolated, poured out prodigiously and with abandon—enough to color the ears of any modern writer who picks up fat checks for the fictional account of some piddling subtlety his hero devises to plate a better hub-cap and win the boss's daughter. What are now called "story ideas" and "plot-gimmicks" are dealt out in this book three to the page, page after page. Last and largest, this is narrative which could not occur without its science—the purest, and almost the rarest form of science fiction.

One of the reasons s f is the parent of so much unspeakable crud these days is its commission of so many cardinal immoralities, notably those of inbreeding and cannibalism. It is high time and past time for s f to infuse itself with the rich hot blood of the old space-opera and shoot some holes in the sky to see what's on the other side. No one's suggesting the abandonment of good writing in good English, or a return to footnotes about the rapacity of hydrofluoric acid. There's a mighty magic sleeping in the old tales (who remembers Hawk Carse and the *Red Pert*?) which is neither part nor product of their crudity. Finding it, s f can raise its sights at least to the readers' adrenals.

So *fiat lux, refiat relax*, which means,

let's keep what we have but find
what we've lost.

A SPECIAL NOTE:—Willy Ley is writing a new series called *Adventure in Space*. This simple fact is quite enough to be called "special"; but special too are its surrounding circumstances. The books may not be had in bookstores; the publisher isn't a publisher; and the price is ridiculous. The first of the four books is now available. It's called *Man-Made Satellites*. It runs a mere 44 pages, but since it is 11¼ by 8½, there is room for plenty of copy, as well as some fine drawings and color plates. The production is first class. The artist is John Polgreen, a good draftsman, a deft hand with an air brush, and a perfect foil for the kind of popularized science of which Ley is the past master. The language is clear and the facts unassailable, and the sequence (from the firing of Vanguard I through other satellite projects to a soundly conjectured manned "moon") is more than informative—it's downright dramatic.

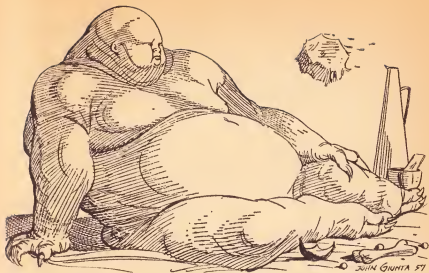
The second book, now at the printers, deals largely with space method and manned vehicles, and is called *Space Pilot*. The third will be *Space Station*, the fourth undetermined at this writing. They may be had for an incredible 50¢ each, plus the coupon you will find on the box top of General Mills' "Sugar Jets."

Offhand—



TITLE	TYPE and TIME	BUY IT—	REMARKS
<i>Two Sought Adventure</i> Fritz Leiber Gnome Press 186 pp \$3.00	Fantasy swash-buckler	—for its swords and sorceresses.	The Fafhrd and Grey Mouser yarns from <i>Unknown</i> , <i>Imagination</i> , and <i>Suspense</i> . Be glad to meet them, overjoyed to meet them again.
<i>Conquest of Earth</i> Manly Banister Avalon 224 pp \$2.75	Space Opera Far future	For your worst enemy's sole shipwreck reading.	Do not write in this space.
<i>Space Plague</i> George O. Smith Avon #T-180 191 pp 35¢	Novel Near future	—instead of food.	Revised, paperbacked HIGHWAYS IN HIDING. The field needs more of this kind of thing, by George!
<i>The Green Odyssey</i> Philip José Farmer Ballantine #210 152 pp 35¢	Novel Strange-planet adventure	—for fun, grand fun.	A mere skeleton of the big book it ought to be—but such wonderful bones! Even without Farmer's usual rich characterizations, it's different, exciting.

TITLE	TYPE and TIME	BUY IT—	REMARKS
<i>High Vacuum</i> Charles Eric Maine Ballantine 192 pp \$2.75 and 35¢	Novel Near future	—in hard covers for your permanent library.	Grant the premise that picked personnel would ever goof off this badly, and you'll find this suspenseful, solid, memorable. Especially neat ending.
<i>The Martian Way and Other Stories</i> Isaac Asimov Signet S1433 159 pp 35¢	Collection, 4 novelettes	—because you better buy <i>all</i> Asimov, hear?	THE DEEP and YOUTH, clever. Title yarn, cheerfully adventurous. SUCKER BAIT, one of the best-written recent stories in s f.
<i>SF The Year's Greatest Fantasy and SF</i> Ed. Judith Merrill Dell B110 35¢ 320 pp Gnome Press \$3.95	Anthology, 18 stories plus summary and recommended list	—in quantity, for yourself, friends, and "Why read s f?" snobs and carpers.	Miss Merrill's 2nd annual. Be grateful that one so percep- tive reads so widely, sieves so wisely. Some gems here you'd surely miss without her.
<i>Sometime, Never</i> Golding, Wyndham, Peake Ballantine #215 185 pp 35¢	3 originals, past s f, future s f, and a "dream"	—Especially for erudite Wm. Gold- ing, grisly Peake.	Golding's climactic scene tops stateroom sequence in <i>Marx' Night at the Opera</i> for hilari- ous confusion. Peake's "Lamb" a unique horror.
<i>Jules Verne, Master of Science Fiction</i> Ed. I. O. Evans Rinehart 235 pp \$3.00	Loving selection annotated plus biblio.	—and discover first- hand a legendary talent.	Excerpts from the Verne everyone knows, plus positive other proof he was much greater than you think. A labor of love; real love, un- blinded and critical too.
<i>Frank Kelly Freas A Portfolio</i> Advent 38 pp \$1.50	16 b&w plates, covers in color, plus biog.	—if you agree that topnotch s f illos deserve some per- manence.	Good clean job, including Vikes and Rees. Technique wondrously varied. Available only in s f shops or Advent, 3508 N. Sheffield Ave., Chi- cago 13.
<i>Take Me To Your President</i> Leonard Wibberly Putnam 186 pp \$3.50	Novel, present time	—to be amused.	A good writer merely dood- ling; but such a very good writer he can't quench quality even when expanding a short story to novel size.



NO EARTHMAN I

by EDMOND HAMILTON

*When the Wind People turned on the Earthmen,
John Tepper ran. But he ran in hatred, not terror—
for he looked on Tharinan as his planet now,
and he would not be driven from it. . . .*

JOHN TEPPER TOOK THE TORCH in his hand.

"No!" cried Nancy. "No, Uncle Jack, don't burn it!"

Tepper said, "Be quiet." His voice was gentle, but it had a note in it that closed the child's mouth instantly. She was ten and would

be eleven next month, if she lived. Larry was only six. He was not crying, for the first time since Sandehir had come pounding on the door with the news at the rising of the third moon.

Now it was sunrise, and John Tepper stood with a torch in his

hand and looked at his dead brother's children.

"I can't make this soft and easy for you," he said. "I wish I could."

I wish I could make it easy for myself, he thought.

He turned and walked across the red-brown grass toward the house.

This is the last of it, he thought, except for the children. My wife, my brother, my sister-in-law, forty-eight years of my life. This planet Tharinan has taken them all. Now I return my house to it. With my own hands I built and with my own hands I will destroy.

He plunged the torch into the firestack made ready against the windward wall.

Flame sprang up bright yellow across the dark wood. It licked the low eaves and curled hungrily over the edge of the roof. Tepper stepped back. The bronze-red star that was Tharinan's sun rose hugely over the horizon and the black smoke gathered and blew.

Tepper stood by the children and thought, *It was harder seventeen years ago when Annie died, but not much. Not much.*

"We should go now, Jack," Sandihir said. "The sooner we're out of the valley—"

Tepper nodded and turned his back on the flames. He lifted Larry into the truck. Sandihir jumped in and started the turbine.

Larry sniffled and asked, "Are we going home, Uncle Jack?"

Smoke blew thick and acrid between them, stinging Tepper's eyes.

"No," he said, "we're going to Terraopolis—Earth Town, where the big ships take off."

"Can we see the ships?"

"Yes. You can see them."

"Come, come," said Sandihir impatiently. The turbine hummed.

Nancy still stood looking at the burning house. She was crying silently. Tepper put his hand on her shoulder. She turned and said, "Uncle Jack—"

Oh God, he thought, she's going to ask me about Alan and June, and what can I tell her? How do you tell a kid her parents are dead and her own home is a heap of ashes?

She didn't ask him. She knew without asking, he thought. She climbed into the truck beside Larry and put her arm around him.

Tepper got in and laid a rifle across his knees and the truck roared off along the dusty road between the fields of grain that stretched as far as Tepper's eyes could see, and that was a long way.

"I'd burn the grain too," he said, "but it's too green."

"They'll get no good of it, Jack. They'll trample it down."

The warm wind blew through the open windows of the truck, ruffling Sandihir's stiff reddish hair that grew in a kind of mane down the back of his neck and

across his shoulders. He was of the Wind People, the same nation that under Strann was now ravaging all this vast area. His skin was a beautiful bronze, lighter than Tepper's deep tan. His eyes were bronze-colored too, with a hint of gold. He had grown up with the Teppers, and was between them in age—younger than John, older than Alan. To them he had been like a third brother.

Sandihir had not changed—unlike others, almost as close, almost as well-known and trusted.

Others had killed Alan and June, who had not believed it possible that old friends could become new enemies. It was only under the combined urging of Sandihir and himself that they had sent the children to Old Farm, which was farther from the hinterland, and safer.

Others who had worked beside John Tepper for years at Old Farm had burned the sheds the night before, destroying all the automatic equipment by which the vast property was worked, as well as the small flier that could easily have taken Tepper, Sandihir, and the children to safety. The light truck, which had been at the house, was all that was left.

Tepper had locked the children in the house and had run toward the flames, in time to see the dark shapes of his own workers scattering off into the shadows. He had caught only one of them.

Vurll, his foreman. Vurll, not a foreman now, but a man of the Wind People, glaring defiantly at Tepper's rifle with the firelight showing his eyes hot and drunken.

"Who told you to do it, Vurll? Was it Strann?"

Vurll had stood, wild and proud. "We are Tharincese. We are Strann's soldiers. Go ahead and shoot."

Tepper had said bitterly, "Soldiers. Looters, burners—and I suppose murder is next. Soldiers!"

"Strann fights the Earthman the only way we can," Vurll had declared. "Go home, all of you. Give us back our land."

"Your land?" Tepper had exploded. "What was here before we Earthmen came? Empty plains. We made them into fertile fields. And now that we've done that, you say the fields are yours. You wouldn't, not in all the ages, make anything out of this place, and now that we have made something, you want it!"

"Strann says kill!" screeched a voice out in the dark, and Tepper had dropped to the ground as a missile flew by his head, and by the time he straightened up, Vurll was gone.

Tepper had gone back to the house and the children, and then before dawn Sandihir had come with word of how Alan and June had died, and there was nothing to do but go.

"Will the Grass People turn

against us too?" Tepper had asked Sandihir.

"I think they will, Jack. Strann is deliberately using murder to commit our people to a finish fight—and now they're committed against the Earthmen, they must follow Strann. Moheen's Grass People will not want to see Strann grow too great."

Sandihir had added miserably, "And I can't fight my own people. But neither am I a murderer. I want to help you get away."

Well, Tepper had thought, that was all he had a right to expect.

God damn us, he thought, we ourselves did this. We brought these nomad hunters new ways, new ideas, and they seized on them—they learned, too fast, too eagerly. They were a proud people. So were the Felshi, who lived beyond the Scarp and were a different breed entirely. But with the Felshi, pride meant hanging on to every shred and scrap of their own culture such as it was, admitting no change whatever. With the others it meant a furious determination not to be second to anyone in anything, no matter what had to be changed or thrown away.

Now, under leaders like Strann, they were busily throwing away all outsiders in a wild surge of nationalism. *If grain is grown on our land we will grow it. If machines are needed we will buy or build them somehow! Tharinan for the Tharinense. Hail Strann!*

And these people were on the march as one nation rather than as separate tribes, delighting in their self-discovery and showing their new strength by destroying everything in their path. . . .

They will not destroy these children, Tepper thought. He stroked the rifle with nervous fingers, as the truck moved along. There was nothing but these two children left to live for and nothing inside himself but a dark sorrow and a darker rage.

Tepper looked around for something to kill.

The sun rose higher. The grain shimmered like soft green silk, rippling and bending. Off to the left a shadow appeared beyond the fields. The Scarp, walling the northeast side of the great valley.

Tepper had been up on the Scarp several times but only when it was necessary and for as short a time as he could make it, an arrangement that seemed to suit the Felshi as well as it did him.

He fidgeted, stroking the rifle, looking here, looking there, smoking one cigarette after another. Finally he said to Sandihir, "For God's sake let me drive."

Sandihir gave him the wheel, taking the rifle on his own knees.

Tepper drove hard, hard, ripping a cloud of dust from the road to hang like a plume behind him.

He had no clear memory of that day except that it passed.

It was twilight, with one red moon high in the sky and another one rising, when the road bent sharply to the right and Sandehir said, "Better stop here, Jack. We don't want to go rushing right out without looking."

Tepper stopped the truck. The Scarp was no more than fifteen miles away and the southern range curved in so that it formed a natural gateway.

The two men jumped down, and Tepper reached into the back for another rifle.

Nancy spoke out of the shadows. "What are you going to do now?"

"Climb the spur and make sure the plain is clear."

"Can we go with you, Uncle Jack?" asked Larry.

"Not this time. Nancy, rustle around in the stuff there and find some food. Sandehir will help—"

"Come over here a minute, Jack," Sandehir said. When he had Tepper out of earshot of the truck he said, "You better let me go."

"Why?" asked Tepper belligerently.

"I don't trust you with a gun, that's why. Please, Jack."

"No," said Tepper. "I've got to go. I've got to keep doing something. If I have time to think I'll go crazy. Feed the kids. I'll eat when I get back."

Sandehir sighed. "Walk softly."

He went back to the truck and Tepper started walking toward the

spur ahead. It was not very high nor very steep. The red moonlight showed the top of it, rough and crinkled in silhouette. The road ran off to his left but he kept straight. When he reached the foot of the spur he slung the rifle over his back and began to climb. The grass and stones were still warm from the day. The air was cooling, and a breath of wind blew in over the crest of the spur from the plain.

There was a smell of burning in it.

Tepper's belly contracted with a sudden pain. He poked his head over the stony ridge.

Farquhar's house was burning. Bluedorn's house was burning, farther away. Beyond Bluedorn's was the distant pyre of Caravella's house and the three smokes on the horizon were Wilson's, Metzger's and Smith's.

He wondered if any of them had gotten away.

The dirt road ran out of the valley and across the plain for a hundred miles or more to meet one of the main planetary highways that led to Terraopolis, a distance of nearly eight hundred miles. Not far in a flier, and not too far even in a truck, if the road was clear.

The road was not clear.

The second moon was above the horizon now and there was plenty of light. At first look the whole plain seemed to be moving.

Wide, dark masses of men tramped down the grain and the grass, a vast sickle swinging slowly and relentlessly. The road was choked with vehicles. A noise came to Tepper—the huge confused clanking and growling and muttering of an army on the move.

Moheen's nation had joined with Strann's and there was no escape this way.

Behind him the home valley was a great trap. He glanced back at the gleaming body of the truck and thought of the children. He allowed himself a moment of despair.

Then he lifted his head again, alerted by a new sound.

A convoy of trucks was running ahead of the army. He counted four of them, two light utility vehicles like his own and two heavy-duty jobs, led by a jeep. Probably they had all been taken from the plains farms. They were barrelling up the road toward the valley mouth.

The moonlight became redder before Tepper's eyes. This was the force they were sparing for him. Four trucks and a jeep to invade Tepper's valley and burn out Tepper's farm with Tepper and his household roasting in the ashes.

He glanced back once more at the truck parked on the valley road where Sandehir and the children waited. Then he dropped below the ridge and began to run.

The spur washed out in a series of humps and gullies. The road ran past them into the valley, in three places built over culverts which carried off the wash in the rainy season. Now in the dry season a truck could wallow past in the shallow gullies with care, but not nearly so fast as on the road.

Tepper unslung the rifle and crouched down behind a boulder. He waited.

The convoy came in sight. Dust flew from under the wheels and he could hear the men talking and laughing, their voices hungry and excited. He steadied the heavy atomic rifle on the rock and fired.

The pellet hit the jeep and blew with a loud bang. The front of the jeep sprang apart in fragments. The body spun around, tilted, and rolled, spilling out men. The truck behind it crashed into it and ground it forward along the road, jarring and grating, and then the truck slewed and rolled on its side. The three trucks strung out behind it slowed with a screaming of brakes. There were other screams, thinner and more terrible.

Tepper sprang up on the rock.

Men began to climb out of the wrecked truck and to pour out of the others. They were armed with guns and with the short native spears and knives, with whatever they could pick up. Some of them

still wore the shirt and shorts of the colonists, others wore the embroidered skirt or leather tunic of their nation. Tepper saw them all through a strange dark haze. He flung up the rifle and fired and fired, raging at them, cursing them. *I'm Tharinense the same as you, God damn you, I was born here and this land is mine!* The pellets burst, tearing holes in the road, spurting up fountains of dust and pebbles. Shapes ran, scuttling, leaping, falling, rolling.

The ground in front of the rock erupted and threw him backward. Pellets began to explode around him. Sobbing, tears of fury turning muddy on his cheeks, Tepper rolled over and ran for cover, around the finger of the spur.

By the time he reached the valley side again he felt better. The burst of violence had calmed and steadied him. He located the truck and made for it, running fast. They would not be able to get their own trucks through on the road for a while but some of them were bound to follow him on foot. He hunched over, making as small a target as possible. Pretty soon he saw Sandihir running toward him.

"Get the truck rolling!" Tepper yelled. "Fast!"

Tepper saw Nancy's face as he climbed in. It was pale as a white flower and her eyes were huge. She was not making any noise

and she was trying to keep Larry quiet. Tepper was grateful to her.

Sandihir started the truck and sent it flying back the way it had come. Tepper told him what had happened. He grunted and shook his head.

"We can't stay in the valley. There's no place to hide and they won't rest till they catch us."

Nancy said, "Why?"

She had leaned forward to listen. Now she said in a tight unfamiliar voice, "What's the matter with them? Are they all crazy? Why do they have to catch us?" She swallowed hard, but her voice cracked anyway. "What did we ever do to them?"

"You have insulted them with superiority," Sandihir said quietly. "Not with the mere pretending of it but with the reality. If they were like the Felshi, without promise, they would merely ignore you, but they are not. They have promise. Someday they will be equal in fact. But until then they cannot endure the insult of your presence. Or of mine. Can you understand that?"

"No," said Nancy. "I don't think so. You can do a lot of things better than I can but I don't want to kill you."

"Well," said Tepper impatiently, "accept it, anyway. You can understand it later."

He was riding with his head stuck out the window, looking back. Sandihir said, still talking

to Nancy, "There are other reasons. Tepper is a name in this part of Tharinan. Your Uncle Jack is looked upon as a great man, a powerful chief. Strann can't afford to let him get away."

Tepper interrupted him. "Never mind all that. Do you see lights back there?"

"No—yes. They must have got a truck through."

Tepper reached out and cut their own lights. "We don't seem to be doing so well with the human Tharinense. Let's go up on the Scarp and see what we can do with the Felshi."

He turned around and got both the youngsters busy making up packs from the stuff they had been able to bring with them. Nancy was a gutsy little one, he thought. She was obviously scared stiff and she must be pretty sure that something had happened to her parents. Still she kept her mouth shut and helped as much as she could. Alan would have been proud of her.

The rusty moonlight was no substitute for headlights. Sandihir had to slow down and the truck behind them gained. But then Sandihir swung the wheel and they left the road and went bouncing off over the grass. Tepper hoped that their pursuers might not see this.

Larry was talking in the back seat. "He did too say it. I heard him."

Nancy hushed him.

He would not be hushed. "Didn't you, Uncle Jack? You said we were going up with the Felshi."

Tepper grunted, hanging out the window. Back on the road the headlights slowed down, hesitated, and then turned off after them. Tepper cursed the aluminum body of the truck, so bright and shiny that it could be seen for miles even by moonlight.

"I don't want to go with the Felshi," Larry said. He began to cry.

Nancy shook him. "Now stop that. Uncle Jack will take care of us."

Larry cried louder. "I don't want to be eat up!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Tepper, showing a fresh clip in the rifle.

"Oh, just a silly story Brinsir told us," said Nancy. Brinsir was—had been—their nurse, and had been a storehouse of old wives' tales from the Wind People.

"They're all witches," Larry wailed. "They do magic and they eat boys."

"Only bad boys," said Nancy. "If you're good they won't touch you. Isn't that so, Uncle Sandy?"

Sandihir said that it was so. "The thing they hate the most is crying. If they hear crying there's no telling what they'll do."

"See?" said Nancy.

Suspiciously, half aware that he

was being conned, Larry shut up, only gulping loudly now and then to show he had not forgotten.

The ground got rougher and they were all busy hanging on. Sandihir drove a little faster. The Scarp bulked up ahead of them, a great black wall against the sky.

"Come to think of it," Tepper said, "what do you know about the Felshi?"

"Me personally?" said Sandihir. "Just as much as you do."

"What do the Wind People know?"

"That kind of thing," said Sandihir, nodding toward Larry. "Witches and black magic, stories that of course we know aren't true."

Tepper looked up at the Scarp. "Do we?"

Sandihir grunted.

The truck began to rock around dangerously. "Got the packs all finished?" said Tepper. "All right. Get ready to move."

"There's the trail marker ahead," said Sandihir and stopped the truck. A huge pinnacle of stone stood up tall and thin in the moonlight, scrawled over from the most ancient times with all manner of symbols. The forces of erosion that had created the pinnacle had also created a path of sorts up the face of the Scarp, which everywhere else was sheer and unclimbable.

The two men jumped out of the truck. Sandihir tossed Larry

up onto his shoulders and went ahead. Nancy followed him, bent over under the weight of an impossibly big pack. Tepper cursed and made her throw it down. "You'll have all you can do to climb just by yourself," he said. In a softer tone he added, "Go on, honey. A few things more or less don't matter. You do."

She trotted on after Sandihir. Tepper settled his own pack and fired again at the following truck, which was now within range. He didn't hit it but once more it slowed and sheered off.

"They won't follow us up the Scarp," Sandihir said. "Not right away. They'll have to go back and talk to Strann, and Strann will have to make a formal talk with the Felshi. There's an old agreement about such matters."

"That won't stop them from shooting at us on the way up."

The sinister-looking cliff stood up over them now like a bastion wall. The wall of a witches' castle, Tepper thought dryly. The red moonlight picked out the high places and dabbled them with blood. Larry let out a couple of experimental wails. This time Sandihir reached up and cuffed the boy, telling him sternly to shut up. Then he was climbing up the narrow path, with Nancy close on his heels.

Tepper hung back, pausing every few feet to look around. The truck that had followed them

stopped some distance away from the cliff. He saw several men get out of it and come scuttling forward, perfectly visible in the moonlight. There were guns among them. If they fired accurately enough they could kill the whole party on the trail. Tepper took careful aim and fired.

A little white star burned fiercely below him. He fired again, repeatedly but not so wildly as he had before by the road. A whole constellation sprang to life on the plain. He could not see how many he had killed, but the three or four shots that came in answer were wide of the mark and when the dust settled there were fewer men and they were going away. Apparently they had decided not to push the matter any farther. Tepper thought that probably they were as much afraid of the Felshi as they were of his gun. Perhaps more.

He didn't blame them. He felt pangs of doubt himself. His relations with the Felshi had been formally correct and mercifully brief. He had had their permission to climb the Scarp and enter their land, which he did not have now, and he had been careful not to offend them, which he was probably about to do.

It was even possible, he supposed, that the infection of murder had spread to them and they might kill him and the others as speedily as Strann's men would.

One last parting shot flared below him, knocking splinters off the cliff. He shrugged and bent himself to the task of climbing.

It was a long job, and a hard one. They rested rather often, taking turns carrying the boy. Before they were through they were carrying the girl as well.

It was almost dawn when they stumbled up over the last of the ascent and onto the level space at the top.

Three squat weird figures stood like three small gargoyles in the red misty gloom between moonset and sunrise, waiting for them.

Waiting. And how had they known someone was coming? Tepper felt a superstitious quiver run down between his shoulder-blades. They might have heard the shots and come to investigate, and they might have seen that someone was on the trail. Except that the nearest village was much too far away for hearing anything.

One of the gargoyles stepped forward. Tepper moved closer to Sandihir, holding Nancy with one arm and his rifle with the other.

Larry, on Sandihir's shoulders, opened his eyes and began to howl.

Instantly Sandihir pulled him down and clapped a hand over his mouth. "Shut up," he said fiercely. Larry continued to make muffled noises, staring with popping eyes over Sandihir's fingers.

The Felshi had put his hands

over his ears. "Loud," he said. "Stop him." His voice was thin, with a queer rusty clicking in it as though it wasn't used much. Tepper remembered that all the Felshi—"all" meaning the few he had seen—sounded that way. He gave Nancy a shake to make sure she was fully conscious and said urgently, "Take Larry over by those bushes and keep him quiet if you have to sit on him." The bushes were low and only about twenty feet away, where he could keep an eye on them.

Nancy grabbed Larry and hurried him off, alternately smacking and pleading with him. There was a final dismal roar in which Tepper distinguished the word "eat", and then apparently she did sit on him because there was a blessed silence. All the Felshi moved forward now. The one in the lead wore something bright on his head, a bit of polished metal that waved and flashed where the triple moonlight caught it. Tepper was pretty sure it was the top of a tin can. Otherwise the man was naked. He was not much taller than Nancy, with fat thighs and a protruding pot belly, and long flat feet that ended in two long toes like fingers. His flesh had a soft buttery look to it. He was perfectly hairless and his skull was round as a doorknob. His features were small, brutish, almost fetal in the middle of his broad face. You could hardly see

any eyes, they were sunk so deep and small. By daylight he would be a pale yellow-brown on his back, shading to white on his belly and limbs.

He was insignificant, silly-looking, dirty, and stricken with the utter poverty of a people so backward they did not even understand they were poor. But somehow he and his fellows sent an uneasy chill through Tepper.

The Felshi, still shaking his head irritably even though Larry was no longer making any noise, said, "You go back." He pointed. "Down."

He spoke a garbled, sloppy version of the plains speech. Tepper answered him carefully, making a low ceremonial bow.

"We ask pardon for coming like this, without permission. But there is war in the valley. These children—"

The Felshi clicked and gobbled. "Children. Can't hear—" All three of them bent their heads and frowned, and then they all relaxed and the one with the bit of tin on his brows said,

"War?"

Tepper explained, keeping it as simple as he could. "I am taking the children to Terraopolis, where they will be safe. I beg permission to pass through your land."

The Felshi grunted. "What you give?" they asked, looking at the packs.

Remembering the gifts he had

brought before, Tepper unrolled the pack he carried and set out a modest row of cans and plastic containers. "These for permission," he said, "and as many more again when we reach your border safely."

The Felshi stood and thought about it.

"All," said the leader, waving his hand with the three long rubbery fingers and the exaggerated thumb.

Tepper rolled up the pack, leaving out the things he had selected. "No," he said firmly. "We must live ourselves. These, and as many more."

Again the Felshi thought.

"You go through? Not bother our people, not stop in the towns?"

"We go through. As fast as we can."

The Felshi grunted and began to pick up the cans.

Tepper turned to call the children. For a second he didn't see them in the deceptive gloomy light-and-shadow pattern of the dying moons. He blinked and they were there, running toward him, Nancy hauling Larry by the hand, mouths and eyes wide open. Nancy started to speak in a shrill gasping voice, but Tepper bade her be still. He caught Larry by the shoulders—the boy for once was speechless. Sandihir took Nancy's hand. They started off while the Felshi were still quarrelling over who was to have what. Tepper wanted to be well on his way be-

fore they had time to change their minds.

"But Uncle Jack!" Nancy cried, in a tone of hysteria.

And he said fiercely, "Don't bother me now."

They left the open and were among thorny scrub and wind-twisted trees that leaned crazily on their elbows. The light shifted and changed and the sun came up. Thirty-one hours ago Tepper had set the torch to his house in the valley. It had been a long day.

He glanced at Sandihir, whose strong-boned face was gray and drawn.

Tepper said, "Look for a good thick patch of thorn."

They found one and crawled in, using their heavy knives to clear a space and then make it impenetrable. They spread blankets for the children.

Nancy looked at them with solemn resentment and said, "Can I tell you now?"

"Sure," said Tepper. "What?"

"Well, while you were talking to those—those nasty-looking things, Larry and I were watching, and all of a sudden they disappeared and you disappeared and everything was different. Even the bushes were gone. I couldn't see anything but trees all around. Isn't that so, Larry? I hollered your name real loud but you didn't answer, and then all of a sudden we were back again—"

She was shaking. "I'm scared.

Uncle Jack. I want to go home."

She began to cry.

He took her in his arms and comforted her. "It was only a dream," he told her. "You fell asleep for a minute. You were there all the time. I saw you."

But there was a cold strange feeling inside him. He could not get it out of his mind that he had thought for a minute they were gone.

"Strann's men will be up talking with the little beasts before long," Sandihir muttered. "We'd better sleep light, and short."

They did, never letting go of their rifles. In his confused and unhappy dreams a question haunted Tepper and it was still in his mind when he woke up. The question was what the Felshi spokesman had meant when he said he couldn't hear over the noise the children were making, because they had not then been making any noise.

The sun was high and hot. Great brazen clouds boiled across it, making a coppery twilight on the land, through which the trees and thorn scrub appeared more lean and distorted than ever. There was no visible sign of the Felshi or of Strann's men.

Sandihir unrolled his pack for food. He stared at the containers, counted them carefully, and then swore.

"Half the stuff's gone," he said.

"It can't be," Tepper said.

"You must have got my pack."

But he had not. Someone had crept in among them while they slept and robbed the pack without waking them.

"And without even disturbing the knots," Sandihir said.

"They must have been careful to retie them exactly."

Sandihir nodded, looking in a puzzled uneasy way at the barrier of cut branches they had made around their sleeping space, which did not seem to have been disturbed any more than the knots.

They ate hurriedly and went on again.

Smoke warned them of the village before they came too close to it. They detoured carefully around it along the rim of the shallow canyon in which it was built. Tepper peered down at it. It was unexpectedly large. The huts straggled here, there, and everywhere, according to the whim of the builder, and every one of them was different in form. All the other primitive peoples Tepper had known followed one rigid tribal pattern in the construction of dwellings, but the Felshi obviously did not. There were round, square, oblong, triangular, and crescent-shaped houses, varying in height and size. There was one larger building, apparently the village meeting-place, that resembled incredibly the crystalline form of a snowflake. The single point of

uniformity was the building material, which was stone. Quite massive stone. There was no cultivation, though the canyon was well-watered and fertile. He wondered how they fed themselves.

He could not see anyone in the village street. Probably they had been warned that strangers were coming and were hiding indoors. Nevertheless, Tepper felt uneasily that eyes were watching from somewhere.

He was glad when the village was behind them. Yet even then he did not feel at ease.

Later they stopped to rest and eat. Tepper climbed the tallest tree he could find and looked over the back-trail.

There was a cloud of dust on it, far away but moving rapidly, the sort of cloud that would be raised by a large body of men on the march.

He slid down in a hurry and reached for his rifle, which he had leaned against the trunk of the tree.

It was gone.

He shouted for Sandihir and began to beat the bushes. They found no sign of anyone there. Sandihir examined the dusty ground around the tree. The only prints there were Tepper's own. But the heavy rifle was gone.

The small seeds of panie, already planted in Tepper, began to grow with great speed.

He raced to where the children

were. It was only a few feet away but before he could get there Larry began to squall. He did not hear Nancy. When he burst through the bushes she was standing with her hands over her mouth and her eyes almost coming out of her head. She was staring at the ground. Tepper could see nothing there except dust, no poisonous creature, certainly no Felshi. For a second, while he was running toward the child, he didn't understand.

Then he remembered that was where the packs had been put down.

They were gone too.

"How?" he asked Nancy, while Sandihir picked up the boy and tried to quiet him. "Did you see who took them?"

She took her hands slowly away from her mouth and shook her head. "They just—went."

"What do you mean, they just went?"

She made gestures. "Like that. We were sitting here eating and they were there in front of us and then they weren't there."

She flung her arms suddenly around his waist and clung to him.

Sandihir said, "That can't be possible. Somebody must have taken them." He began to hunt feverishly for tracks.

He didn't find any, any more than he had around the tree where Tepper's rifle vanished.

He came and stood before Teppor, and his face had a strange expression. "My people were right, Jack. I laughed and now I must eat my laughter. We are in a country of witehes."

"I don't believe in witehes," Teppor said. "I don't believe in witchcraft. Listen, we have no food now. We have our belt-knives and one rifle, and Strann's men are coming on the wings of the wind. Do you want to sit and wait for them?"

Sandihir shrugged. He came along with Teppor, carrying Larry in one arm and the rifle in the other. His gaze roved continuously, peering among the thorny bushes and the twisted trees.

Suddenly he dropped the boy, flung the rifle to his shoulder, and fired.

Dirt, roots, and branches followed the flash and smoke into the sky. Sandihir began, "They're following us—" and the rifle vanished out of his hands. In almost the same instant a great stone flew at him through the air. He lifted his hands as though to ward it off and it dashed them aside, striking his head with a terrible impact. He fell backward and Teppor knew from the way he fell that he was dead before he touched the ground.

Teppor pulled the children to him. A storm of stones and branches burst upon him, as though blown by a great wind or

showered by a blast, only there was neither wind nor blast. He thought he saw in the distance behind it the forms of two or three Felshi. He turned to run, trying to shelter the children with his body. Objects struck painfully on his back and shoulders. Apparently they wanted to vent their spite on him before they killed him, because none of the missiles was as brutally well-aimed as the stone that had struck down Sandihir. His head was gashed and blood ran into his eyes, and still he ran, with Larry's weight heavier at every step and Nancy's thin legs flagging. Then Larry was gone. Just gone, without a tug or a whimper, between the lifting and the setting-down of a foot.

Teppor stopped and turned half around, crying out. Nancy screamed. The scream was cut down the middle as by a sharp knife and she was gone, too. The air was dark with thick dust. He saw the loom of something big coming at him and tried to dodge it but it came too fast. It was Sandihir's body. It struck him and knocked him down and then part of a tree dropped on them both and pinned Teppor under his foster-brother, crushing the breath out of him and stunning him with the violence of its fall.

When he came to it was sunset and he had the answer to the Felshi, as though part of his mind

had been at work in that time, putting together the explanation out of half-forgotten bits of reading and discussion.

Tepper was a farmer, a hard-headed man. He had never taken much stock in extra-sensory perception and the manipulation of solid matter by some mysterious power of the mind. But in the course of a not unintelligent lifetime he picked up a fair knowledge of ESP, just as he had learned a fair bit about witchcraft.

Here he was faced with a thing that had to be science or witchcraft. He chose science.

The Felshi were espers.

That explained how they had known that outsiders were on their way up the Scarp, and what they had meant when they complained that the perfectly silent children were making too much noise. They were telepathic—

They were telepathic, and they could manipulate matter by non-physical means. Telekinesis? Teleportation? He was not sure of the words, but they were not important anyway. What was important was that not only the rifles and the packs but the children themselves had been manipulated out of his hands, and his brother Sandihir killed, by these wretched little beasts with the superhuman powers.

He lay under the weight of Sandihir's body and the crushing

tree, watching the sunset redden to the color of new blood, and he wondered what weapons you could use against such creatures, and how you could fight them.

He didn't see any way.

He began carefully to work himself free, digging and sliding in the loose dirt a little at a time. Poor Sandihir's body had saved him from getting his own bones broken by the tree. Some time after moonrise he was free, dragging himself away on all fours until he could find the strength to stand.

He called the children's names, without hope.

There was no answer.

He walked back toward the village, moving with a stubborn slowness like the start of an avalanche.

There was no reason to believe that the children were in the village. They could have been transported anywhere within the range of the Felshi mind-power. They might not even be alive. But the Felshi were in the village and that was the only place he knew of to make a beginning.

He walked faster.

Before he had gone far he remembered that Strann's men were on this trail too and were probably by now between him and the village. The glimmering of an idea came to him. He removed his boots, his hat, and his shirt, caching them in a clump of thorns. With the long knife loose in his

belt, he left the trail and moved parallel to it, quiet and inconspicuous as one more shadow among the many that the moons cast under the trees.

Strann's men had passed along the rim of the canyon above the Felshi village and then had stopped, still in sight of it, to cook a meal and rest before the night march. Tepper saw their fires first and then he saw them, sprawled on the ground or sitting around the fires, their voices loud and careless. He was amazed at the number of them. There must have been fifty, perhaps more—a lot more than ought to be needed to take care of two men and two children.

He got as close as he dared on foot and then went flat on his belly, slithering in the dust.

When he stopped he was within ten feet of one of the fires, with the edge of the canyon close on his right. The canyon-wall was low and sloping here, and the weird roofs of the Felshi village were visible in the red moonglow.

Strann's men, tall hunters of the Wind People, were talking, and Tepper saw men of the Grass People among them. Their golden and rust-colored manes caught the firelight, the hard beautiful planes of their bronze bodies gleamed. There were bottles passing around and they were laughing wild laughter, terrible in its cruelty, pitiful in its ignorant pride.

They looked toward their leader, and so did Tepper. He knew that leader. Vurll, Tepper's old foreman, his voice loud, his manner harshly commanding.

Vurll was talking of what they would do when the Earthmen were gone, how they would grow rich and strong.

"—and it will be easy," Vurll was saying, "to deal with these on our way back." He pointed to the Felshi village. "The little toads have no weapons."

One of the Wind People said doubtfully, "But they have been here since before our memory, and no one has ever touched them."

"It is time they were touched," Vurll said. "They're disgusting little insects, to be stamped out. The future has no use for them."

And that, Tepper thought bitterly, was always going to be the way of it. Tharinan for the Tharinese!

"But it is still said that the Felshi are witches," said the doubtful one.

He was drowned out by scoffing and laughter. Vurll and others in the group had been to school—the Earthman's schools—and were loud in their skepticism.

Tepper waited until one of the men went to relieve another who was standing watch at the edge of the canyon a little distance away. The man had a rifle. Tepper followed him, clinging to the low shadows.

Did the Felshi read the minds of these men and let them pass, to trap them later in the bush? Tepper thought so, but it didn't matter. He needed to get into the village unnoticed and the only way he could think of to manage it against the telepathic Felshi was to cover the presence of his own mind by the presence of others. And the only way he could think of to do that was to get a fight started that would keep both the Felshi and the Wind and Grass people fully occupied for a while. He thought that the mass teleportation of fifty or sixty active men clear out of reach would be a problem even for the Felshi.

The man he was following settled himself on a boulder overlooking the valley, holding the rifle across his knees.

The light of the fires did not reach this far. Tepper drew the long knife from his belt and moved forward.

The knife was sharp and Tepper was quick and the man had no chance to cry out. The rifle slid down across his body. Tepper picked it up and dropped over onto the slope of the canyon wall, where it would be difficult for those above to see him too clearly. Then he set up a sudden shouting in the language of the Wind People.

"The Felshi! Take up your weapons! They're armed with stones—"

He began to fire at the village below.

He fired four times as fast as he could pull the trigger and then he ran like hell down the slope to the canyon floor. The Wind and Grass People were alert warriors. They sprang to action immediately, firing toward the village with a great crash and flare of pellets which burst among the houses on the nearer edge of the village.

The answering barrage of stones went high over Tepper's head, aimed at the rim. He ran, taking advantage of every scrap of cover, toward the other side of the village.

In the confusion of darkness and moonshadow, thinking that the Felshi were close upon them, the Wind and Grass People believed that the stones were coming at them in the usual way and it only made them madder. They started to pour down the canyon slope, firing as they came.

Tepper ran crouching in among the houses on the other side of the village.

And now that he was here he didn't know what to do.

A feeble light showed in a window slit nearby. He hugged the wall and looked in.

A big lump of rock—probably coal, Tepper thought—burned in the middle of the floor. All around the room Felshi were stirring, sitting up in frowsy nests of dried grass, looking about them in anger

and alarm. Tepper had never seen Felshi women before. They were more repulsive than the men, a thing he would not have believed possible. The young looked like evil little tadpoles. They were all obese. There was a family group of eleven inside, and four of them were so draped in fat that Tepper couldn't tell whether they were male or female. He noticed that as soon as the young ones woke up, food of some sort materialized in their hands. The stench that came to him through the open window was sour and thick as smoke.

A second lump of coal appeared beside the first one and burst instantly into flame. The light became brighter, flickering on the massive stone blocks of the walls cut and fitted with incredible precision and smooth as silk, without chisel marks or chips.

One of the men vanished, as cleanly as switching off a lamp. There was some gobbling and elieking of oral speech and one of the very little ones eried until its mother materialized something for it to chew on. Most of the conversation, if there was any, appeared to be going on mentally. The four enormously fat ones simply sat with their eyes shut. Pellets exploded on the other side of the village with distant banging sounds and flares of light.

The man returned almost at once. Apparently he communicat-

ed something to the others because they began to disappear one by one, the children first and then the women and then the men until only the four obesities were left. One of them groaned and quivered, a little furrow of effort appearing between its bulging brows. It vanished and reappeared again on the other side of the room, where it gave up and provided itself out of the empty air with a huge hunk of something edible and sat there feeding, apparently not caring if it lived or died as long as it didn't have to exert itself.

The other three stayed where they were. They too began to eat, ignoring the sounds of battle.

Looking at them, Tepper thought he understood why the Felshi were the way they were. Nature had shoved a silver spoon down their throats and they had choked on it.

If you could think food into your hands there was no need to keep fit for hunting, no need to learn husbandry and agriculture. If you could build houses by teleporting great hunks of rock into place, and if you could transport yourself anywhere you wanted to go by the same methods, there would be no reason to invent tools or the wheel or the art of taming animals. If you could provide yourself with everything needful including protection from your enemies simply by lying on your backside and thinking about it,

there wouldn't be any need to learn or do anything. Survival would be no problem at all. So you would survive. But you would not do any great amount of growing.

So they had stagnated in their ill-smelling comfortable squalor, stuffing themselves until—

Until they could only transport themselves a few feet, or not at all. Until their mental powers were so dimmed by gluttony that they were as helpless as babes.

Maybe.

Or maybe they could still rouse themselves if they were prodded.

There was only one way to find out. Tepper ran around to the low door and ducked in.

The four hulks sat and fed and gently sweated, grunting as they breathed. If they picked up the foreign vibrations of his mind they did not show it.

He spoke aloud in the language of the Wind People. "Where are the children, the stranger children?"

Four heads, round hairless domes set on rippling rolls of fat, turned slowly toward him. They did not even open their eyes. They threw him out. One instant he was in the hut, the next instant he was outside, dizzy with the shock.

He went back in and they hurled him out again.

But they only threw him a few feet and it took the four of them together to do it.

Perhaps if he could find one alone, or some that were even fatter and farther gone than these, he could get an answer to his question.

He ran erratically between the scattered houses, peering inside.

The women and children apparently had removed themselves to a place of safety and the men were presumably teleporting or driving away the attackers. But in nearly every house, squatting in their comfortable nests and catting, were several of the blubber-mountains.

Tepper despaired of finding one alone. When he found two he went in.

"Where are the children?" he demanded. "The boy and girl that were stolen from me?"

He glared at them with savage eyes.

They turned just as the others had and he felt an impact that staggered him, but they could not transport him out of the hut. He struck the nearest one angrily across the head with his rifle barrel.

"Answer me or I'll hurt you so you won't be able to eat. Where are they?"

The one he had struck whimpered and moaned, dropping his food to clutch his head. The other one opened his eyes, dull little pinpoints of malice sunk in lardy folds. A second impact jarred Tepper, as violent as the Felshi could

make it but weaker by half than the first. Tepper grinned unpleasantly and advanced with his rifle upraised.

"You can't drive me out. Where are the children?"

"Not—know," whispered the Felshi.

Tepper hit him. Not hard enough to damage him, not just yet, but hard enough across the mouth to remind him.

"Where?"

He struck the lump of food out of the creature's hands and kicked it away.

"Where?"

"In—temple," the Felshi whispered.

Tepper grabbed the creature by the throat. "Why? Why did you take and keep them?"

A slyness flickered briefly in the dim eyes of the Felshi. "Hostages," he mumbled. "More Earthmen might come—later."

Tepper understood then. The Felshi powers could handle a few dozen men, perhaps. But they must be aware of Earth weapons, and what they could do. With the children here, long-range weapons could not be used on them.

He ran out of the hut and through the streets toward the large building he had seen, that was shaped incredibly like a great stone snowflake.

It was closer to the fighting. Intermittent flares lit the walls of the weird houses. There were

screams and cries. He thought the Wind and Grass People were giving back. As soon as they found out what strange things were happening to them they would run for sure, schooling or not. It would be a while before the Felshi were wiped out. Unfortunately.

The temple loomed up in front of him. He did not see any light or movement inside. He went through the first door he found, moving recklessly but ready to shoot at anything he saw. All he saw was darkness, relieved by fitful gleams from the bursts outside. There was a long corridor and then a huge central space with nothing in it but shadows and some kind of a square construction in the middle of it.

He shouted, "Nancy! Larry!" in a voice of wild desperation.

And they answered.

He ran to the big shadowy square. It was eight feet high and their voices seemed to come from inside it. He ran all around it and could find no entrance, and then he realized that Nancy was screaming, "The top, the top!" He jumped and pulled himself up to the top of the wall. The square was a stone pen, open at the top for air, and he had no doubt the Felshi had instantaneously thought it into being to hold their small hostages.

"Uncle Jack," Nancy sobbed from down below. "Oh, please, Uncle Jack!"

He jumped down and lifted them up to the top one by one and then climbed up again and got them down on the other side.

"Now," he said, "if we run like hell we may have a chance. If we can get clear of the village while the fighting is still on, before the Felshi start coming back—"

And before they can turn the attention of their minds to us.

He led the children to the door and into the street. They ran. And Tepper remembered how he had run before, just this way, with Larry heavy in his arms and Nancy's thin legs not quite able to keep up, and he thought, If they take them from me again I'll kill them all before I die, no matter what they do.

They reached the edge of the village and left it behind, running through the trees of the canyon floor. Tepper had circled the battle, so that when he reached the rim of the canyon wall, if he did reach it, he would be well beyond the place where he had killed the lookout and started the whole thing. The sounds of it were getting ragged now, the shots few and far between. He climbed the slope, panting and scrabbling in the grass, dragging himself at last over the rim and pulling Nancy after him.

There was a crashing and thudding in the thorns not twenty feet away. Somebody screamed, a wild howl of pain and terror. Tepper

whirled around. One after the other, three men of the Wind People dropped out of the sky and into the bushes where the Felshi had thrown them bodily. One of them must have died instantly, but the other two were only hurt, and one of them was Vurll.

Vurll had dropped his rifle, but he still had his long knife. He saw Tepper, and rage and hate replaced the fright in his face and he started forward. And Tepper thought, Sandehir's dead and Vurll's alive, the sons-of-bitches always come through—but not this time! He fired.

He did not miss. And now the way was clear. The Felshi would be busy for a while with the warriors—long enough, he hoped, for a man with long legs and a powerful determination to get out of their country.

He set off into the bush with the two children, and no one stopped them. . . .

Days later, in Terraopolis, he stood at the barrier fence and watched a great silver ship hurtle into the sky, carrying the youth and future of the Tepper family to Earth and safety.

Perhaps I should have gone with them, Tepper thought. But what good would I do them . . . how could I make a home for them? My home is here, and by God I'm going to stay and fight for it. For myself, and for them.

He was not the only one. There were others, first, second, third generation, who were not going to be driven like sheep from their land. Already they were forming a territorial army, recruiting men, and determined to fight it out.

And damn it, why not? He knew what the cry would be on Earth, on the old settled planets where battles had all been fought long ago and forgotten. They would weep tears of love and admiration back there for the noble native Tharinense who only wanted peaceful self-determination and who were being kept from their rights by the grasping Earthmen who had stolen their grain-fields.

Well, thought Tepper, the hell with them. I'm not an Earthman

—not I! I'm a man, and I try to be a decent man, wherever I am.

And Sandihir wasn't a Tharinense. He was a man too, and a better one than most. It's time the sentimentalists back there quit talking about "natives" as though there were something sacred about them. It's time they asked only if men acted like men or like bastards. For the bastards, like Strann and Moheen, are going to pay for their actions even if they are natives twenty times over. And there will be peace here again.

Perhaps, he thought, if I and my rifle and others like me hold out, the young Teppers may come back some day not too far off to Old Farm and to *their* native world. . . .

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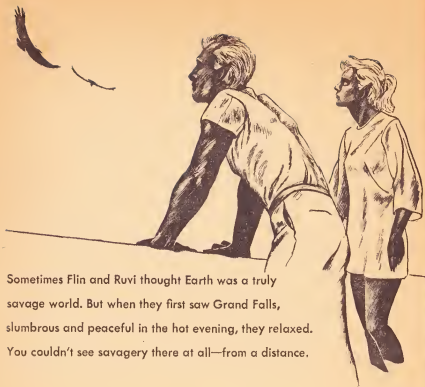
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Sometimes Flin and Ruvi thought Earth was a truly savage world. But when they first saw Grand Falls, slumbrous and peaceful in the hot evening, they relaxed. You couldn't see savagery there at all—from a distance.

ALL THE COLORS OF THE RAINBOW

by LEIGH BRACKETT

It had rained in the valley, steadily and hard, for thirty-six hours. The ground was saturated. Every fold in the rough flanks of the hills spouted a muddy torrent and the torrents flowed in sheets over the flat country below and poured through raw self-gouged channels

into the river. And the river, roused from its normal meek placidity, roared and rolled like a new Mississippi, tearing away its banks, spreading wide and yellow across the fields, into the orchards and over the roads, into the streets of Grand Falls where the people

had left their houses and fled to the safety of higher land. Uprooted trees and broken timbers knocked at the walls of the old brick buildings on the main street. In the lobby of the Grand Falls Hotel the brass spittoons floated ever higher, clanging mournfully when they struck their sides together.

High on the ridges that enclosed the valley to the northeast and the southwest, hidden by a careful hand, two small mechanisms hummed quietly, ceaselessly. They were called miniseeders and they were not part of Earth's native technology. Their charges would run out in a matter of days, but in the meantime they were extremely efficient, hurling a steady stream of charged particles into the sky to seed the clouds moving over the ridges.

In the valley, it continued to rain. . . .

IT WAS HIS FIRST BIG JOB ON his own responsibility, with no superior closer than Galactic Center, which was a long way off. He was not at all sure he was going to be able to do it.

He said so to Ruvi, slowing down the cumbersome ground car so she could see what he meant.

"Look at it. How can this mess ever be made into a civilized continent?"

She turned her head in the quick way she had and said, "Scared, Flin?"

"I guess I am."

He was ashamed to say it, particularly since it was not really the difficulty and importance of the job that daunted him but the planet itself.

He had studied weather-control engineering on his home-world at Mintaka, which was one of the science's earliest triumphs, and he had done research and field work on five other worlds, at least two of which were in fairly early stages of control. But he had never been anywhere before that was so totally untouched by galactic civilization.

Peripheral Survey had made contact with these fringe systems only in the last couple of decades and that was far too short a time to make much of an impress on them. Even in the big urban centers an alien like himself could hardly walk down the street yet without attracting an unwelcome amount of attention, not all of it polite. Coming from the Federation worlds with their cosmopolitan populations, Flin found this hard to take.

But Galactic Center was enthusiastic about these fringe worlds because quite a few of them had an amazingly high, if highly uneven, degree of civilization which they had developed literally in their several vacuums. Center was in a rush to send them teachers and technicians and that was why he, far ahead of his due

time, had been pitchforked into the position of leading a four-man planning-and-instruction team of weather-control experts.

It was a splendid opportunity with splendid possibilities for the future, and the raise in pay had enabled him to take on Ruvi as a permanent mate much sooner than he had hoped. But he hadn't bargained for the loneliness, the constant uncertainty in relationships, the lack of all the vast solid background he was used to on the Federation worlds.

Ruvi said, "All right then, I'll admit I'm scared too. And hot. Let's stop this clumsy thing and get a breath of air. Right over there looks like a good place."

He eased the car off the narrow road, onto a point of land with a few big stones around the edge to mark the drop-off. Ruvi got out and went to stand by them, looking out over the valley. The breeze pressed her thin yellow tunic against her body and ruffled the soft short silvery mass of curls around her head. Her skin glistened even under this alien sun with the dark lovely green of youth and health. Flin's heart still turned over in him every time he looked at her. He did not suppose this would last forever but as long as it did it was a beautiful sort of pain.

He made sure he had done the required things to keep the car from bolting away over the cliff

and then joined her. The breeze was hot and moisture-laden, full of strange smells. The valley wound away in a series of curves with a glint of water at the bottom. On either side of it the rough ridges rolled and humped, blue in the distance where the heat haze covered them, rank green closer at hand with the shaggy woods that grew wild on them, the trees pushing and crowding for space, choked with undergrowth and strangling vines, absolutely neglected.

"I suppose," said Ruvi, "they're full of wild animals, too."

"Nothing very dangerous, I believe."

Ruvi shivered slightly. "Whenever I get just a little way out of the cities I begin to feel that I'm on a truly savage world. And everything's wrong. The trees, the flowers, even the grass-blades are the wrong shape, and the colors are all wrong, and the sky isn't at all the way it ought to be."

She laughed. "Anyone would know this was my first trip away from home."

Two huge birds came into sight over one of the ridges. They hung in the sky, wheeling in slow circles on still gray-brown wings. Instinctively Flin put his arm around Ruvi, uncertain whether the birds would attack. They did not, drifting on down over the valley where the air currents took them. There was no sign of hu-

man habitation and except for the narrow road they might have been in a complete wilderness.

"It is rather beautiful, though," Ruvi said, "in its own way."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the only standard you really should use to judge things, isn't it? Their own."

Flin said sourly, "That's easier to do when you know what 'their own' standard is. They seem to have thousands of them here. That's why Sherbondy keeps telling us to get out and see the country, to learn what his people are really like." Sherbondy was their contact with the local Government, a big hearty man with an enormous enthusiasm for all the things that were going to be done. "The only trouble with that is that it would take a lifetime to—"

There was a noise like an avalanche behind them. Flin jumped and turned around, but it was only a huge red vehicle roaring by, spouting smoke from a pipe behind the driver's compartment. The driver noticed them just before the truck passed out of sight and Flin thought the man was going to drive it right into the woods while he was staring.

He sighed. "Let's go."

They got back into the car and Flin managed to get it back onto the road and headed in the direction he wanted to go without mishap—always, he felt, a minor triumph. The primitive vehicles

that were subject to everybody's individual whim of operation on these equally primitive road systems still frightened the wits out of him after nearly six months.

It was just as hot as ever. As a gesture of courtesy, and to avoid attracting any more attention than was necessary, he had adopted the local variety of shirt and pants. Most of the men in the various instruction groups did this soon after landing. It didn't seem to matter what the women of the groups wore as long as certain puritanical tabus were observed, but the men found it less embarrassing to conform. Flin thought the garments abominably uncomfortable and envied Ruvi her relatively cool tunic.

She seemed wilted and subdued, leaning back in the corner of the wide overstuffed seat, her eyes half closed, the graceful tilted contours of her face accentuated by the gleaming of sweat on the delicate ridges.

"I think of home," she said, "and then I think of the money."

"It's something to think of."

The woods rolled by, clotted underneath with deep shadow, full of rustlings and rank dusty smells. Sometimes they passed a kind of food-raising station that had not been seen in the Federation for centuries, where part of the land was in several kinds of crops and part of it in pasture and the whole thing was operated by

one man and his family. Sometimes they passed through little towns or villages with very strange names, where the people stared at them and the children pointed and yelled, *Green niggers, lookit the green niggers!*

Flin studied the houses. They were different from each other, and quite different from the ones he had grown used to in the cities, but they were all built on the same hut-based principle. He tried to imagine what life would be like in one of these towns, in one of these wooden or stone or brick houses with the queer decorations and the pointed roofs. Probably Sherbondy was right. Probably all the Federation people should try to get closer to the everyday life of the planet, familiarize themselves with what the people thought and felt, how they coped with their environment. The next few decades would see changes so radical and complete that this present life would soon begin to be forgotten. . . .

The change had already begun. This planet—the native name for it was Earth, a rather pretty one, Flin thought—had been making its first wobbling steps into space on its own when the Survey ships arrived. With Federation technicians and techniques that process had been enormously accelerated. The first manned ships built on Earth and operated by Federation-trained

but native-born personnel had been licensed for limited service within the last seven or eight years. Planning surveys were under way, guided by groups like his own, not only in weather-control but in global unification, production, education, and above all pacification—the countless things that would have to be accomplished to make Earth a suitable member of the Federation.

But these things had not yet made themselves felt on the population as a whole. Most of Earth was going along just as it always had, and Flin knew from experience that many of the natives even on the administrative level were extremely touchy and proud, not inclined to accept any sudden alterations in their thinking; probably the more provincial masses were even more so. It would be necessary to win them over, to make them feel that they were equals in the task and not merely the recipients of gifts from an older and wider culture.

It would be a long, interesting business. An energetic young man who stuck with it could make a career out of it, a satisfying and very profitable one.

The only trouble was—

Ruvi's thoughts seemed to have paralleled his own, because she said, "Are we going to stay on here?"

"We have to stay until we've finished our immediate job."

"But after that? I know some of the men have already decided to."

"The offers these people make are very good," Flin said slowly. "They'll need technicians and educators for a long time yet, and Center is in favor of it because it'll speed up integration." He reached out and patted her. "We could be rich and famous."

She smiled, very fleetingly. "All right," she said in a quiet voice, "I'll start making myself like it."

She began to stare grimly at the queerly shaped and colored trees, the peculiar houses that looked so dreadfully unfunctional, the crowds of chattering natives in the towns. Finally she shook her head and gave up, lying back with her eyes closed.

"I'll try it again sometime when it isn't so hot."

"Weather-control will fix that."

"But not for years."

They drove in silence. Flin felt vaguely ill at ease and unhappy, but he kept thinking of Shcrbondy's offer and the things it might lead to for them, and he did not say anything. He did not want to commit himself with Ruvi yet, one way or the other.

About mid-afternoon there was a violent downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning. As a weather expert Flin knew perfectly well what caused the disturbance, but the knowledge did nothing to decrease the

effect of it on himself. Ruvi simply hid her head in the corner and shook. Flin kept on driving. If you let the natives know that you were afraid of their weather, they would never believe that you would be able to control it. He made it a practice in Washington to walk out in storms that had even the natives cowering. He could barely see the road well enough to stay on it and he was nervous about floods, but he trundled resolutely ahead.

Eventually he ran out of the storm, or it passed over. The sun came out again, boiling and steaming the saturated air. It was difficult to breathe. Great black clouds still bulked in the sky, presaging more trouble later. In the strange light the countryside took on a look completely alien and somehow ominous, the little scattered houses crouching among their weird trees like suspicious gnomes with hostile eyes, the empty fields and dripping woods suggestive of infinite loneliness.

"I'm tired and hungry," Ruvi said. "Let's stop."

"The next town that has accommodations." Flin was tired himself. He found driving a strain and yearned for the fleet little air-cars that darted so easily and safely through the peaceful skies of the Federation worlds. They would not be practical here until global weather-control was an actuality.

The next town was a long way off. The road lifted and wound through low rough mountains and over brawling stream beds. The villages they passed through were very tiny, sometimes with only two or three dwellings.

The shadows grew heavy in the valleys. Ruvi began to fret a bit. Flin knew that it was only because the shadows and the wild country made her nervous, but it irritated him. He was having trouble enough of his own. An animal of some sort scuttered across the road and he nearly went into the ditch avoiding it. The light was bad. He was worried about the fuel gauge, which was low. And the road seemed to go on forever through a steadily darkening tunnel of trees.

They passed a tiny wooden temple next to one of the absolutely barbaric native burying grounds that always horrified them, the ritual stones gleaming pallid among uncut grass and briar roses. It all flashed by so quickly that Flin realized he had pushed the speed of the big car beyond the limit of safety. So he was already slowing down when he swung around a curve and came right onto a farm vehicle moving very slowly in the road. He managed to go around it without hitting anything but it gave him a sharp fright. The man driving the thing shouted after them. Flin could not hear ex-

actly what he said but there was no doubt he was angry. After that Flin went carefully.

There began to be painted signs along the edge of the road.

Ruvi read them off. "Restaurant. Hotel. Garage. There is a town ahead. Grand Falls, I think."

The road passed suddenly over a crest and there was a wide irregular valley below them, full of light from the low sun which shone through a gap in the west. Perhaps Flin was in an exceptionally receptive mood but it struck him as one of the loveliest places he had seen. There was a river flashing with curious dull glints from the setting sun, rolling smoothly over a pretty little falls that burst into bright foam at the bottom. The white houses of the town were bowered in trees and blooming vines, slumbrous and peaceful in the hot evening, with one tall white spire standing over them.

"Look, I see the hotel," said Ruvi, pointing. "Oh glorious, how I will love a cool bath before dinner!"

She ran her fingers through her silvery curls and sat up straight beside him, smiling as he drove down the hill into Grand Falls.

It had rained here recently. The pavements still glistened and the air steamed with it. There was a fragrance of nameless flowers, very sweet and heavy. On

the shadowy porches of the houses along the way there was a sound of voices and hidden laughter, and the small scurrying shapes of children moved under the dripping trees.

The road became the main street splashed with the crude colors of neon signs, the lighted windows showing yellow in the dusk. On both sides now there were curious low buildings, apparently quite old, built tight together so that each row looked like one building except its front was broken up into narrow vertical sections with different cornices and different patterns of wood or brickwork around the windows. They were mostly of red brick, which seemed to be a common building material, and not above two stories high.

The shops and offices were closed. The eating and drinking places were open and busy, and somewhere inside there was music playing, a strong simple beat with a high-pitched male voice wailing over it. The smell of flowers was drowned out by the pungence of hot wet brick and hotter, wetter asphalt. A few couples walked toward the gaudily lighted entrance of a theatre farther along the street, the women wearing bright-colored dresses, their long hair done in elaborate coiffures, their thick sturdy legs and arms bare. Knots of young men lounged against the walls near

the drinking places. They were smoking the universal cigarettes and talking, looking after the women.

Seen close up now the town was less beautiful than it had looked from the crest. The white paint was dirty and peeling, the old buildings poorly kept up.

"Well," Flin muttered, "Sherbondy said to get off the beaten track and see the real native life undiluted."

"The hotel looks charming," Ruvi said determinedly. "I am not going to quarrel with anything."

Even in the dusk they were beginning to draw attention. First the little knots of idlers were attracted by the long gleaming car with the Government plates, and then by Flin and Ruvi themselves. There were other cars in the street, both moving and parked along the curb, but the one Flin was driving seemed to be newer and fancier than most. He could see people pointing and looking at them. He swore silently and wondered if they could have dinner sent up to their room.

The hotel was on the corner of the main intersection. It was three stories high, built of the red brick, with a crudely ornate cornice and long narrow windows. A balcony ran around its two exposed sides at the second floor level, extending over the street and supported on slender metal pillars which

had once been painted white. A second tier of pillars on the balcony itself supported a roof. There were five or six oldish men sitting in chairs on the balcony, and several more below on the covered portion of the street.

Flin looked at it doubtfully. "I wonder if it *has* a bath."

Her own enthusiasm somewhat cooled, Ruvi said, "It'll do for one night. It might be a long way to the next one and I don't suppose it would be any better."

Flin grunted and pulled the car in to the curb and stopped.

There was a scraping of chair legs as the men sat forward or rose to come closer. Flin got out and walked around the car. He smiled at the men but they only stared, blowing strong smoke and squinting through it at him and the car and the license plates and then at Ruvi.

Flin turned and opened the door for her. He noticed over the low roof of the car that men were beginning to come from across the street, and already a number of boys had sprung from nowhere and were clustering like insects, their eyes bright and excited.

He helped Ruvi out, slim in her yellow tunic, her silver curls picking up the light from the tall front door of the hotel.

One of the men said in a high shrill voice, "Green as grass, by God!" There was laughter and somebody whistled.

Flin's face tightened but he did not say anything nor look at the men. He took Ruvi's arm and they went into the hotel.

They walked on a faded carpet, between islands of heavy furniture in worn leather and dusty plush. Fans turned slowly against the ceiling, barely disturbing either the hot air or the moths that had come in to flutter around the lights. There was a smell that Flin could not fully identify. Dust, the stale stink of dead tobacco, and something else—age, perhaps, and decay. Behind the large wooden desk a gray-haired man had risen from a chair and stood with his hands spread out on the desk top, watching them come.

The men from the street followed, crowding quickly through the doors. One particular man seemed to lead them, a red-faced fellow wearing an amulet on a gold chain across his broad paunch.

Flin and Ruvi stood in front of the desk. Once more Flin smiled. He said, "Good evening."

The gray-haired man glanced past them at the men who had come in, bringing with them a many-faceted odor of sweat to add to what was already inside. They had stopped talking, as though they were waiting to hear what the gray-haired man would say. The fans in the ceiling creaked gently as they turned.

The gray-haired man cleared his throat. He, too, smiled, but there was no friendliness in it.

"If you're wanting a room," he said, with unnecessary loudness as though he were speaking not to Flin but to the others in the lobby, "I'm sorry, but we're filled up."

"Filled up?" Flin repeated.

"Filled up." The gray-haired man took hold of a large book which lay open in front of him and closed it in a kind of ceremonial gesture. "You understand now, I'm not refusing you accommodations. I just don't have any available."

He glanced again at the men by the door and there was a little undertone of laughter.

"But—" said Ruvy, on a note of protest.

Flin pressed her arm and she stopped. His own face was suddenly hot. He knew the man was lying, and that his lie had been expected and was approved by the others, and that he and Ruvy were the only two people there who did not understand why. He also knew that it would do them no good to get into an argument. So he spoke, as pleasantly as he could.

"I see. Perhaps then you could tell us of another place in town—"

"Don't know of any," said the gray-haired man, shaking his head. "Don't know of a single place."

"Thank you," said Flin and turned around and walked back across the lobby, still holding Ruvy's arm.

The crowd had grown. Half the people in Grand Falls, Flin thought, must be gathered now on that one corner. The original group of men, reinforced to twice its size, blocked the doorway. They parted to let Flin and Ruvy through but they did it with a certain veiled insolence, staring hard at Ruvy who bent her head and did not look at them.

Flin walked slowly, refusing to notice them or be hurried. But their nearness, the heat and smell of them, the sense of something menacing about them that he did not understand, twisted his nerves to a painful tightness.

He passed through the door, almost brushing against a young girl who squealed and jumped back out of his way with a great show of being afraid of him. There was a bunch of young people with her, both boys and girls, and they began a great cackling and shoving. The crowd had become more vocal as it grew. There were a lot of women in it now. Flin waited politely for them to separate, moving a step at a time toward the car, and the voices flew back and forth over his head, at him, around him.

—ain't even human!

Hey, greenie, can't you afford to feed your women where you

come from? Lookit how skinny—
Are they kidding with that
crazy hair?

—just like I seen on the teevee,
and I says to Jack then, Jack
Spivey I says, if you ever see
anything like them coming down
the road—

Hey, greenie, is it true your
women lay eggs?

Laughter. Derision. And some-
thing deeper. Something evil.
Something he did not understand.

He reached the car and got
Ruvi into it. As he bent close to
her he whispered in her ear, in
their own language, "Just take it
easy. We're getting out."

Mama, how come them funny
niggers got a bigger car'n we got?

Because the Government's pay-
in' them big money to come and
kindly teach us what we didn't
know before.

"Please hurry," whispered Ruvi.

He started around the car to
get in and found his way blocked
by the red-faced man with the
gold chain, and beyond him a
solid mass in the street in front
of the car. He sensed that they
were not going to let him
through, so he stopped as though
he had intended to do so and
spoke to the man with the chain.

"I beg your pardon—could you
tell me how far it is to the next
city?"

The girls were giggling loudly
over Ruvi's tunic and the way she
looked gnerally. They were all

the fat-hipped, heavy-breasted
local type, with thick legs and
thick faces. Flin thought they had
very little to criticize. Just be-
yond the man with the gold chain
were four or five younger men
standing together. They had very
obviously come out of one of the
taverns. They were lean rangy
young men with their hair
slicked down and their hips
thrust forward in a curiously in-
solent slouch. They had eyes, Flin
thought, like animals. They had
been by the door when he came
out. They were still looking at
Ruvi.

"The next city?" said the man
with the gold chain. He accented
the word *city* as Flin had. He
had a deep, ringing voice, ap-
parently well used to addressing
crowds. "A hundred and twenty-
four miles."

A long way at night through
strange country. A great anger
boiled up in Flin but he kept it
carefully inside.

"Thank you. I wonder where
we might get something to eat
before we start?"

"Well now, it's pretty late," the
man said. "Our restaurants have
just about now stopped serving.
Am I right, Mr. Nellis?"

"You are, Judge Shaw," said a
man in the crowd.

This too was a lie, but Flin
accepted it. He nodded and said,
"I must have fuel. Where—"

"Garage is closed," Shaw said.

"If you got enough to get you down the road apiece there's a pump at Patch's roadhouse. He's open late enough."

"Thank you," said Flin. "We will go now."

He started again, but Shaw did not move out of Flin's way. Instead he put up his hand and said, "Now just a minute there, before you go. We've been reading about you people in the papers and seeing you on the tee-vee but we don't get much chance to talk to celebrities here. There's some questions we'd like to ask."

The rangy young men with the animal eyes began to sidle past Shaw and behind Flin toward the car, leaving a heavy breath of liquor where they moved.

"A damn lot of questions," somebody shouted from the back, "like why the hell don't you stay home?"

"Now, now," said Shaw, waving his hand, "let's keep this friendly. Reverend, did you have something to say?"

"I certainly do," said a fat man in a soiled dark suit, shouldering his way through the crowd to stand peering at Flin. "I bet I've preached a sermon on this subject three Sundays out of five and it's the most important question facing this world today. If we don't face it, if we don't answer this question in a way that's acceptable to the Almighty, we might just as well throw away all these

centuries of doing battle with Satan and admit we're licked."

"Amen," cried a woman's voice. "Amen to that, Reverend Tibbs!"

Reverend Tibbs thrust his face close to Flin's and said, "Do you consider yourselves human?"

Flin knew that he was on dangerous ground here. This was a religious man and religion was strictly a local affair, not to be discussed or meddled with in any way.

So he said cautiously, "On our own worlds we consider ourselves so. However, I am not prepared to argue it from your viewpoint, sir."

He moved toward the car, but the crowd only pulled in and held him tighter.

"Well now," said the Reverend Tibbs, "what I want to know is how you *can* call yourselves human when it says right in Scriptures that God created this good Earth here under my feet and then created man—*human* man—right out of that self-same earth. Now if you—"

"Oh, hell, save that stuff for the pulpit," said another man, pushing his way in front of Tibbs. This one was sunburned and leathery, with a lantern jaw and keen hard eyes. "I ain't worried about their souls and I don't care if they're all pups to the Beast of the Apocalypse." Now he spoke directly to Flin. "I been seeing faces on my teevee for years.

Green faces like yours. Red ones, blue ones, purple ones, yellow ones—all the colors of the rainbow, and what I want to know is, ain't you got any white folks out there?"

"Yeah!" said the crowd and nodded its collective heads.

The man they called Judge Shaw nodded too and said, "I reckon you put the question for all of us, Sam."

"What I mean is," said the lantern-jawed Sam, "this here is a white town. In most other places nowadays, I understand, you'll find blacks and whites all run together like they were out of the same still, but we got kind of a different situation here, and we ain't the only ones, either. There's little pockets of us here and there, kind of holding out, you might say. And we ain't broken any laws. We didn't refuse to integrate, see. It was just that for one reason or another what colored folks there was around—"

Here the crowd snickered knowingly.

"—decided they could do better somewheres else and went there. So we didn't need to integrate. We don't have any color problem. We ain't had any for twenty years. And what's more, we don't want any."

A shout from the crowd.

Shaw said in his big booming voice, "The point we'd like to

make clear to you, so you can pass it on to whoever's interested, is that some of us like to run our lives and our towns to suit ourselves. Now, this old Earth is a pretty good place just as she stands, and we never felt any need for outsiders to come and tell us what we ought to do. So we ain't any too friendly to begin with, you see? But we're not unreasonable, we're willing to listen to things so as to form our own judgments on them. Only you people had better understand right now that no matter what goes on in the big cities and other places like that, *we* aren't going to be told anything by a bunch of colored folks and it doesn't matter one damn bit what color they are. If—"

Ruvi gave a sudden cry.

Flin spun around. The young men who smelled of liquor were beside the car, all crowded together and leaning in over the door. They were laughing now and one of them said, "Aw now, what's the matter? I was just—"

"Flin, *please!*"

He could see her over their bent backs and bobbing heads, as far away from them as she could get on the seat. Other faces peered in from the opposite side, grinning, hemming her in.

Somebody said in a tone of mock reproach, "You got her scared now, Jed, ain't you ashamed?"

Flin took two steps toward the car, pushing somebody out of the way. He did not see who it was. He did not see anything but Ruv's frightened face and the backs of the young men.

"Get away from there," he said.

The laughter stopped. The young men straightened slowly. One of them said, "Did I hear somebody say something?"

"You heard me," said Flin.

"Get away from the car."

They turned around, and now the crowd was all quiet and watching. The young men were tall. They had big coarse hands, strong for any task. Their mouths hung open a little to show their teeth, and they breathed and smiled, and their eyes were cruel.

"I don't think," said the one they called Jed, "I liked the tone of your voice when you said that."

"I don't give a damn whether you liked it or not."

"You gonna take that, Jed?" somebody yelled. "From a nigger, even if he is a green one?"

There was a burst of laughter. Jed smiled and tilted his weight forward over his bent knees.

"I was just trying to talk friendly with your woman," he said. "You shouldn't object to that."

He reached out and pushed with his stiffened fingers hard against Flin's chest.

Flin turned his body and let the force of the thrust slide off

his shoulder. Everything seemed to be moving very slowly, in a curiously icy vacuum which for the moment contained only himself and Jed. He was conscious of a new and terrible feeling within him, something he had never felt before. He stepped forward, lightly, strongly, not hurrying. His feet and hands performed four motions. He had done them countless times before in the gymnasium against a friendly opponent. He had never done them like this before, full force, with hate, with a dark evil brute lust to do injury. He watched the blood spurt from Jed's nose, watched him fall slowly, slowly to the pavement with his hands clutching his belly and his eyes wide open and his mouth gasping in astonishment and pain.

Outside this center of subjective time and hate in which he stood Flin sensed other movement and noise. Gradually, then with urgent swiftness, they came clear. Judge Shaw had thrust himself in front of Flin. Others were holding Jed, who was getting up. A swag-bellied man with a badge on his shirt was waving his arms, clearing people away from around the car, Jed's friends among them. There was a confused and frightening clamor of voices and over it all Shaw's big authoritative voice was shouting.

"Calm down now, everybody, we don't want any trouble here."

He turned his head and said to Flin, "I advise you to be on your way just as fast as you can go."

Flin walked around the car where the policeman had cleared the way. He got in and started the motor. The crowd surged forward as though it was going to try and stop him in spite of Shaw and the policeman.

Suddenly he cried out at them.

"Yes, we have white folks out there, about one in every ten thousand, and they don't think anything of it and neither do we. You can't hide from the universe. You're going to be tramped under with color—all the colors of the rainbow!"

And he understood then that that was exactly what they feared.

He let in the drive and sent the big car lurching forward. The people in the street scattered out of his way. There were noises as thrown objects struck the top and sides of the car and then the street was long and straight and clear ahead of him and he pushed the throttle lever all the way down.

Lights flashed by. Then there was darkness and the town was gone.

Flin eased back on the throttle. Ruvi was bent over in the seat beside him, her hands covering her face. She was not crying. He reached out and touched her shoulder. She was trembling, and so was he. He felt physically sick,

but he made his voice quiet and reassuring.

"It's all right now. They're gone."

She made a sound—a whimper, an answer, he was not sure. Presently she sat erect, her hands clenched in her lap. They did not speak again. The air was cooler here but still oppressive with moisture, almost as clammy as fog against the skin. No stars showed. Off to the right there were intermittent flashes of lightning and a low growling of thunder.

A clot of red light appeared on the night ahead, resolving itself into a neon sign. Patch's. The roadhouse with the pump.

Ruvi whispered, "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"I have to," he said gently, and pulled off the road onto a wide gravelled space beside a ramshackle frame building with dimly lighted windows. Strongly rhythmic music played inside. There was a smaller building, a dwelling-house, beside the tavern, and midway between them was a single fuel pump.

Flin stopped beside it. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he turned and fumbled in the back seat for his hat and jacket and put them on, pulling the hatbrim down to hide his face as much as possible. Ruvi had a yellow shawl that matched her tunic. She drew it over her head and shoulders and made herself

small in the corner of the seat. Flin switched off the dashboard lights.

A raw-boned lanky woman came out of the dwelling. Probably the man ran the tavern, leaving her to tend to smaller matters. Trying to keep his voice steady, Flin asked her to fill the tank. She hardly glanced at him and went surlily to the pump. He got out his wallet and felt with shaking hands among the bills.

On the dark road beyond the circle of light from the tavern, a car went slowly past.

The pump mechanism clicked and rang its solemn bells and finally was still. The woman hung up the hose with a clash and came forward. Flin took a deep breath. He thrust a bill at her. "That'll be eight-eighty-seven," she said and took the bill and saw the color of the hand she took it from. She started to speak or yell, stepping back and bending suddenly in the same movement. He saw her eyes shining in the light, peering into the car. Flin had already started the motor. He roared away in a spurt of gravel, leaving the woman standing with her arm out, pointing after them.

"We won't have to stop again until we reach the city. It'll be all right there."

He threw his hat into the back seat. Ruvy let the shawl fall away from her head.

"I've never wanted to hide my face before," she said. "It's a strange feeling."

Flin muttered savagely, "I've got a lot to say but I can't say it now, not if I'm going to drive."

The road was narrow and black beneath the thunderous sky, between the empty fields and dark woods.

There was another car in the road ahead, moving slowly.

Flin overtook it.

It was well out in the middle. He waited a moment for the driver to see that he wanted to pass and make room for him. The car continued to block the road. He sounded his horn, politely at first and then loudly. The car stayed where it was, moving slower and slower so that he had to brake to keep from hitting it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Ruvy. "Why won't they let us by?"

Flin shook his head. "I don't know."

He began to be afraid.

He pulled as far as he could to the left, riding on the rough berm. He sounded the horn and tramped on the throttle.

The other car swerved too. Its rear fender struck his front one. Ruvy screamed. Flin steadied the wildly lurching car. Sweat prickled like hot needles all over his skin. He stamped his foot hard on the brake.

The other car skidded on

ahead. Flin swung the wheel sharp right and pushed the throttle down, whipping the big car across the road and onto the berm on the other side.

For one brief moment he thought he was going to make it. But the other car swayed over with ruthless speed and punched and rebounded and punched again with its clattering fenders like a man pushing another with his shoulder. Holes and stones threw Flin's car back and forth. He fought to control it, hearing the voices of men shouting close by . . .

Hit the sonofabitch, knock his goddam ass off the road, That's the way—

There was a tree ahead. His headlights picked it up, brought it starkly into view, the rough-textured bark, the knots and gnarls, the uneven branches and dark leaves. Flin spun the wheel frantically. The lights made a wide slicing turn across meadow grass and weeds. The car bounded, leaped, sprang over uneven ground and fell with a jarring crash into the ditch of a little stream and died.

Silence, dazed and desperate.

Flin looked back. The other car had stopped at the side of the road. Men were getting out of it. He counted five. He thought he knew what men they were.

He reached across Ruvi and opened the door and pushed her

ahead of him. "We're going to run now," he said, surprised at the flat banality of his voice, as though he were speaking to a child about some unimportant game. The car tilted that way and Ruvi slid out easily. Flin came behind her into mud and cold water that lapped around his ankles. He half helped, half threw her up the low steep bank and followed, grabbing her hand then and pulling her along.

He did not look back again. He did not have to. The men called as they ran, laughing, hooting, baying like great hounds.

Crooked fire lighted a curtain of black cloud. Flin saw trees, a clump of woods. The fire died and was followed by a hollow booming. The woods vanished. He continued to run toward them. The grass and weeds tangled around his legs. Ruvi lagged, pulling harder and harder against his grip, sobbing as she ran.

They were among the trees.

He let go of her. "Go on. Hide yourself somewhere. Don't make a sound no matter what happens."

"No. I won't leave—"

He pushed her fiercely, trying not to scream at her aloud. "Go on!"

The young men came loping through the long grass, into the trees. They had a light. Its long white beam probed and poked.

See anything?

Not yet.

Who's got the bottle? I'm dry from runnin'.

See anything?

They're in here somewhere.

Breath rasping in big hard throats, legs ripping the undergrowth, feet trampling the ground.

I'm gonna find out, by God. After I take care of that sonofabitch I'm gonna find out.

Whatcha gonna find out, Jed?

If it's true they lay eggs or not.

Laughter.

Who's got the goddam bottle?

Wait a minute, hey, right there, swing that light back, I hear the bastards moving—

Hey!

Flin turned, straightening his shoulders, standing between them and Ruvi.

One of them held the light in his face. He could not see them clearly. But he heard the voice of the one called Jed speaking to him.

"All right, greenie, you're so anxious to teach us things—it ain't fair for us to take and not give, so we got a lesson for you."

"Let my wife go," said Flin steadily. "You have no quarrel with her."

"Your wife, huh?" said Jed. "Well now, how do we know she's your wife? Was you married here under the laws of this land?"

"We were married under our own laws—"

"You hear that, boys? Well,

your laws don't cut any ice with us, greenie, so it don't seem that you are man and wife as we would say. Anyway, she stays. That's part of the lesson."

Jed laughed. They all laughed.

In their own language Flin said to Ruvi, "Run now."

He sprang forward at the man holding the light.

Another man moved quickly from the side and struck him across the shoulders and neck with something more than the naked hand. A tree branch, perhaps, or a metal bar. Flin went down, stunned with pain. He heard Ruvi cry out. He tried to tell her again to run but his voice had left him. There were scuffling sounds and more cries. He tried to get up and hard-shod feet kicked him and stamped him down. Iron knuckles battered his face. Jed bent over him and shook him.

"Hold him up there, Mike, I want to be sure he hears this. You hear me, greenie? Lesson One. Niggers always keep to their own side of the road."

Crash. Blood in the mouth, and pain.

Ruvi?

"Hold him, Mike, goddam it. Lesson Two. When a white man takes a mind to a female nigger, she ain't supposed to get uppity about it. It's an honor, see? She's supposed to be real nice and happy and flattered. See?"



More blood, more pain.

Ruvi, Ruvi!

"Lesson Three. And this one you better remember and write out and hang up where all the other red, blue, green, and purple niggers can see it. *You never lay a hand on a white man.* Never. No matter what."

Ruvi was quiet. He could not hear her voice.

"You understand that? No matter what!"

Hya-hoo!

Give it to him, Jed. Tell him so he don't forget.

Dark, night, thunder, red fire, red blood, silence, distance, one long fading echoing voice.

—just like a real human woman by God what do you know—

Laughter.

Ruvi—

Gone.

There was a great deal of public indignation about it. Newspapers all over the world had editorials. The President made a statement. The Governor made a formal apology for his state and a sincere promise to find and punish the handful of men responsible for the outrage.

Grand Falls protected its own.

No witnesses could be found to identify the men involved in the incident that had occurred in town. Judge Shaw was sure he had never seen them before. So

was the policeman. The attack itself had taken place out in the country, of course, and in the dark. Flin did not remember the license number of the car nor had he seen the faces of the men clearly. Neither had Ruvi. They could have been anyone from anywhere.

The name "Jed" by itself meant nothing. There were a number of Jeds in the neighborhood but they were the wrong ones. The right Jed never turned up, and if he had Flin could only have identified him definitely as the man he himself had struck in front of the Grand Falls Hotel. ("Mighty hot tempered, he seemed," Judge Shaw said. "Took offense where I'm sure none was meant. Like he just didn't understand our ways.")

So there was no finding and no punishment.

As soon as the doctors told him he was fit to travel, Flin informed his group that he was returning home. He had already been in contact with Galactic Center. Someone else would be sent to take his place. They were very angry about the whole thing at home and various steps were being considered. But since Earth was not a member planet she was not subject to galactic law, and since the future of a world was considerably more important than the actions of a few individuals or the feelings of their victims, probably nothing very drastic

would be done. And Flin recognized that this was right.

Sherbondy came to see him.

"I feel responsible for all this," he said. "If I hadn't advised that trip—"

"It would have happened sooner or later," Flin said. "To us or to somebody else. Your world's got a long way to go yet."

"I wish you'd stay," said Sherbondy miserably. "I'd like to prove to you that we're not all brutes."

"You don't have to prove that. It's obvious. The trouble now is with us—with Ruvi and me."

Sherbondy looked at him, puzzled.

Flin said, "We are not civilized any more. Perhaps we will be again some day. I hope so. That's one reason we're going home, for psychiatric treatment of a kind we can't get here. Ruvi especially . . ."

He shook his head and began to stride up and down the room, his body taut with an anger he could only by great effort control.

"An act like that—people like that—they foul and degrade everything they touch. They pass on some of themselves. I'm full of irrational feelings now. I'm afraid of darkness and trees and quiet places. Worse than that, I'm afraid of your people. I can't go out of my rooms now without feeling as though I walk among wild beasts."

Sherbondy sighed heavily. "I

can't blame you. It's a pity. You could have had a good life here, done a lot—"

"Yes," said Flin.

"Well," said Sherbondy, getting up, "I'll say good bye." He held out his hand. "I hope you don't mind shaking my hand—"

Flin hesitated, then took Sherbondy's hand briefly. "Even you," he said, with real sorrow. "You see why we must go."

Sherbondy said, "I see." He turned to the door. "God damn those bastards," he said with sudden fury. "You'd think in this day and age—Oh, hell. . . Goodbye, Flin. And the best of luck."

He went away.

Flin helped Ruvi with the last of the packing. He checked over the mass of equipment the weather-control group had brought with them for demonstration purposes, which he would be leaving behind for his successor.

Then he said quietly, "There is one more thing I have to do before we go. Don't worry about me. I'll be back in plenty of time for the take-off."

She looked at him, startled, but she did not ask any questions.

He got into his car and drove away alone.

He spoke as he drove, grimly and bitterly, to someone who was not there.

"You wanted to teach me a lesson," he said. "You did. Now I will show you how well you

taught me, and how well I learned."

And that was the real evil that had been done to him and Ruvi.

The physical outrage and the pain were soon over, but the other things were harder to eradicate—the sense of injustice, the rankling fury, the blind hatred of all men whose faces were white.

Especially the hatred.

Some day, he hoped and prayed, he could be rid of that feeling, clean and whole again as he had been before it happened. But it was too soon. Far too soon now.

With two fully charged mini-seeders in his pockets he drove steadily toward Grand Falls. . . .

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Venturings



• When Venchy's picture appeared in our last issue, we didn't really think we'd be hurting anybody's feelings. Astonishingly enough, there was a repercussion—one of our more distinguished authors reports that his wife looked thoughtfully at Venchy, turned on her husband and demanded, "Why did you pose for *this*?"

The most unhappy part of that tale is that the wife, who is one of the most distinguished preserve-makers we know, has decided that her husband has been unfairly exploited by this editorial board, and announces that she will send us no more samples of *her* works. Any sour notes in this issue may be regarded as unintentional, and resulting directly from the logical act of this excellent, if misguided, author's wife . . .

• Venchy didn't do so well this month in his errands. Most important duty assigned to him was to advance on the lair of Theodore Sturgeon and put to him the question direct: "When, sir, are you going to put aside for a time the examination of convoluted people writhing in the embrace of their neuroses, and talk instead about a man jumping in a spaceship to go somewhere and do something?" Venchy dragged in very late and very battered. "Go way!" Sturgeon allegedly had snapped, discourteously offering the back of a bruising hand, "That's exactly what I'm doing." And indeed he was—as you will see on page 5 of this issue. . . .

• Correspondence: (from Edmond Hamilton) "While 'No Earthman I' (page 85) is an adventure story, you'll find the basic viewpoint exactly opposite to that of Leigh in her recent story for you (page 108). That reflects a long-standing Brackett-Hamilton argument over (happily) a purely academic future-situation. I accuse her of favoritism toward other-planet people at the expense of Earthmen. She retorts with the charge that I am a future-imperialist. . . . I've read so many 'Earthmen are beasts and Martians are nice little people' yarns, that I've got sick of the placid assumption. . . ." (from LEIGH BRACKETT) "When we argue this out between ourselves I customarily squelch the opposition by quoting the passage from *Perelandra* by C. S. Lewis, which goes in part: '. . . a man [here E. Hamilton is understood] obsessed with . . . the idea that humanity, having now sufficiently corrupted the planet where it arose, must at all costs contrive to seed itself over a larger area . . . planet after planet . . .' This sort of discussion pleasantly enlivens many a long winter evening in the country."

—RPM

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